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Asimov's
SCIENCE FICTION

WPS 36009

FOREIGN DEVILS
by Walter Jon Williams

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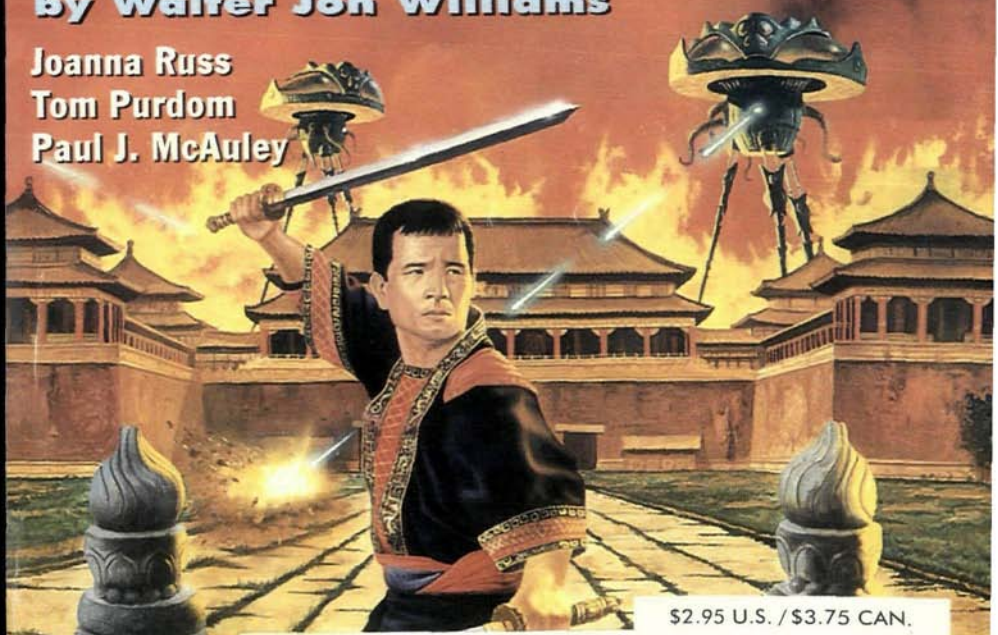
Tom Purdom
Paul J. McAuley



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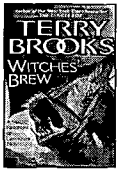

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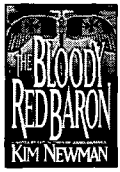

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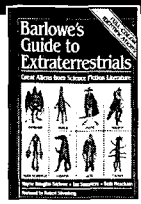

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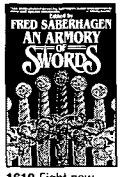

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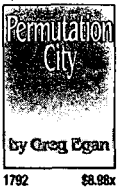

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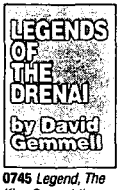

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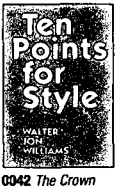

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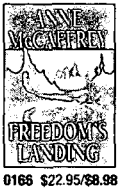

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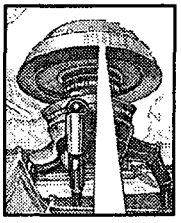
Vol. 20 No. 1 (Whole Number 241) January 1996

Next Issue on Sale January 2, 1996



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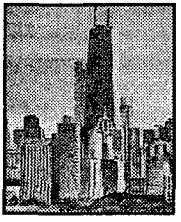

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Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. *Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario, Canada Post International* Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260657. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. ISSN 1055-2146. GST #R123293128

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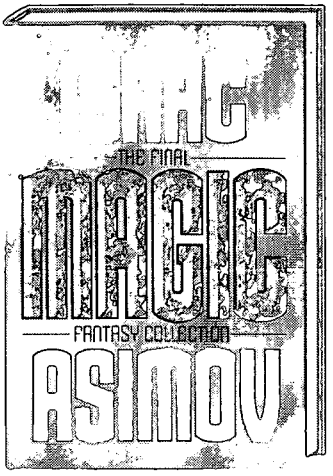

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY BATTERY

As the twentieth century shambles toward its close, I have at last, just in the nick of time, come into possession of one of the essential medical devices of the epoch now ending: the Williams' Twentieth Century Battery. How I managed to maintain good health to my present advanced age without its help, I have no idea. Good luck and clean living in equal proportions, I guess. But now it sits before me in all its cutting-edge technological splendor, and I mean to put it into operation just as soon as I can figure out how to make it work. This one must be right up there with the Abrams Vibratory Oscilloclast and the Urbuteit Sinuothermic Machine and other sadly underrated medical marvels of our vanishing era.

The Williams' Twentieth Century Battery, a product of the P.G. Williams Company of 5 Barclay Street, New York City, is contained in a small rectangular wooden box, about the size that an index-card file would have been kept in, in the days when people kept information on index-card files instead of in data-bases. Within the box are two compartments. The larger of them contains the Battery itself. The other compartment holds these mysterious objects:

—Two yellow cords, about the length and width of shoelaces for high boots, with metal connector pins mounted at either end. There are four holes, much like the jacking ports on an amplifier, on the wooden base to which the Battery is affixed, and these connector pins fit nicely into them.

—Two small, furry yellow things, circular in shape, that look something like Walkman headphone covers, mounted on metal plates with threaded female connectors in their centers.

—Two spindle-shaped artifacts of painted wood about two inches long, tipped with short metal shafts with threaded male connectors which screw into the little openings on the backs of the furry things. There is also a small transverse hole in each shaft into which a connector pin from the yellow shoelace-like cords will fit.

—Two tubular metal items of the same length, open at one end and equipped at the other with jacking ports into which the pins from the shoelace-things also will fit.

—One additional metal tube, likewise also open at one end and sufficiently larger in diameter than the other two so that they can both be slid inside it. At its other end a small handle, somewhat like the handle of an old-fashioned rolling pin, is mounted.

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So much for the hardware. (Possibly a piece is missing from my unit as delivered, since everything comes in pairs except the gizmo with the rolling-pin handle. I'll investigate, when I get a chance, the possibility that its mate got lost somewhere in the time stream while the Battery was making its circuitous journey toward me.)

Now for the documentation. This is contained on a printed card affixed to the inside of the box lid. Unfortunately, like all too much documentation nowadays, it starts right off with the assumption that you already know how to hook the device up:

"Connections have been made and the Battery is ready for use."

Well, not exactly. Connections *haven't* been made. I've jacked various pins into various ports and slipped one of the tubular things inside what may be its metal jacket, but I'm not at all confident that anything of a profoundly electrical nature has been accomplished, because there are two hooks of bare wire affixed to the bottom of the main unit itself, much like the hooks that form that nice link between the light-switches on your wall and the grounding wires in the wall. Not only aren't these hooks attached to any sort of terminals, I don't have a clue as to what I ought to attach them to. And so, when I move on to the second sentence of the documentation—"To start the Battery, push the switch from the button marked 'Off' to the button marked 'On' "—nothing at all happens.

Troubleshooting information is

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immediately provided, though:

"If the vibrator does not start with a buzzing sound when the switch is turned to the button marked 'On,' give it a slight tap with the finger." Done. Naught avails. "If it does not start then it must be that the vibrator screw has been turned out of adjustment. The screw should be set so that the point of it will barely touch the small piece of platinum on the spring (vibrator.) This screw is carefully adjusted before the Battery leaves our factory, but when a Battery is shipped by express or freight the screw may be turned a trifle if the box is handled roughly."

Well, I see the vibrator screw, all right, just to the left of the Battery. Its adjustment seems to be okay. I also see what I take to be the small piece of platinum, although I confess it looks like an ordinary strip of tin to me. (I am not an expert metallurgist.) However, a quick visual inspection leads me to conclude that nobody has substituted a tin strip for the prerequisite platinum. Nevertheless, nothing happens when I throw the switch.

"If the Battery starts with a buzzing sound," I am warned, "do not touch the screw."

Not a problem. No buzzing sound, no nothing.

Simple literary man that I am, I am stymied for the moment, and I will not be able to report to you immediately on the results of my experiments with the Williams' Twentieth Century Battery. Sooner or later one of my techie friends will come visiting and I will request a consultation. But undoubtedly the thing would have profound beneficial effects on my health if only I knew how to make it work. It has all the look and feel of a terrifically useful medical device. I can't wait to have it doing whatever it is supposed to do.

The documentation goes on to advise me that "the strength of any of the currents is increased by gradually withdrawing the tube from the coil." (I see the tubes, I think. But what coil?) "The amount taken is shown on the scale in degrees." (Yes. The Battery is calibrated from 10 to 100 in silver ink.) "To take currents through different parts of the body, wet the sponge-electrode" (the furry yellow thing, obviously) "and apply to the parts effected with one hand, while you hold one of the handles in the other." (Huh?) "Or you can use the foot-plate instead of the handle." (What foot-plate? Where?) And then a heartrending parenthesis: "(See direction book.)" So there is more documentation after all. But, alas, not included with my Battery.

The information I do have now offers words of wisdom: "In using the machine never take currents strong enough to be uncomfortable, and in giving it to other persons, never give them a sudden shock or more than they desire to take." Indeed. Wouldn't dream of it, P.G.

And now the fun part: "By putting one handle into a bowl of water and holding the other in your hand, you can take an electric foot-bath."

Oh, P.G. Williams of Barclay

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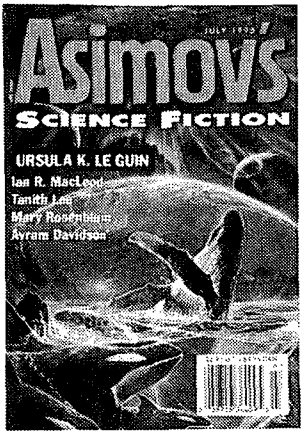

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Street! What joys you have denied me by failing to supply the direction book! How I yearn for the delicate gurgling of the electric footbath after a hard day's creative effort! Your Twentieth Century Battery, evidently, will permit me to experience the beneficent delights of sticking my finger in a light-socket, only more so, and in a scientifically calibrated way. Ah, health! Ah, technology! If only I had paid some attention in that electrical engineering class at Junior High School 232!

At least I pay attention to the final instructions on the printed sheet: "When you have finished using the Battery, be sure to push the switch to the button marked 'Off.'" Done. "If the switch is allowed to remain turned on, they will exhaust the dry battery." They? I don't know who "they" is. There's a little antecedent problem here, I guess. High-tech people are sometimes a bit wobbly on grammar: things like this are only to be expected in documentation. But even I know that you need to turn switches off or batteries will run down. I do so at once.

"When the dry cell used in this machine is exhausted, it can easily be replaced with a new cell. The price of the dry cells is 35 cents each. If you will lift the top of the Battery out of the box, notice how the cell is connected, you will have no trouble in putting in a new cell."

Not so fast, P.G. I *have* lifted the top of the Battery out of the box. The cell doesn't seem to be connected at all, so I would have plenty of

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trouble putting in a new one. And your punctuation in that last sentence isn't so hot, besides.

But P.G. Williams, I guess, will never take heed of these words. The Williams' Battery, I would guess from the typography of the documentation sheet and a certain faded look about the paper on which it is printed, was last manufactured between 1895 and 1908, a golden age of medical quackery, the heyday of Kickapoo Joy Juice and the Sanche Oxydonor. It has taken nearly the entire span of the century for which it was intended to reach me, arriving only by courtesy of Alison, my wife's beloved stepmother, who keeps all manner of not-quite-state-of-the-art treasures in the attic of her two-hundred-year-old family home in an obscure corner of New England.

The incoming century will surely bring us all manner of virtually real nostrums and panaceas every bit as efficacious as the Williams' Battery, and I figure it behooves me to give the original model a try before the new stuff arrives. So I will endeavor to get the damned thing hooked up correctly before the old century expires, or I do, and if possible I will provide further reports.

And you, Sheila Williams, omnicompetent Executive Editor of this magazine, can it be that P.G. was your great-grandfather? And do you have a spare instruction manual for the Williams' Twentieth Century Battery hidden away in *your* attic? Check it out, kid. My health may depend on it. ●

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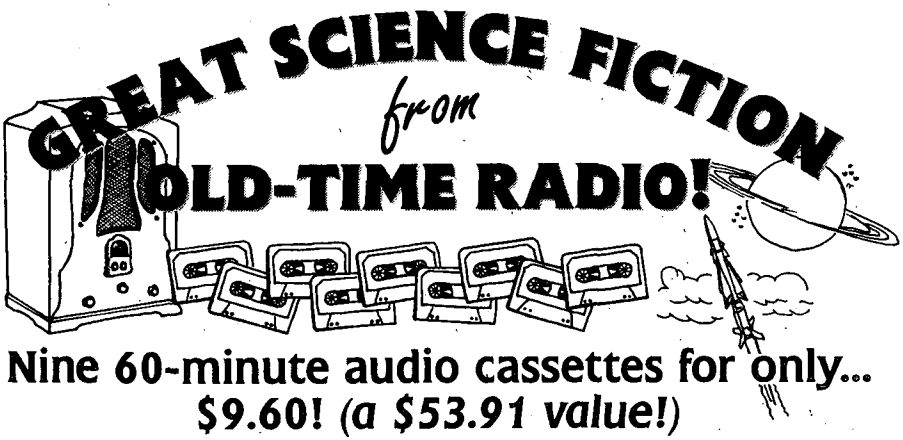

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LETTERS

Dear Gardner, Sheila,
and Norman,

The review essay, "A Few Good Readers," in the April 1995 *Asimov's*, cries for some response. I read it and appreciated it . . . last in an issue I had read everything else in, of the only such publication to which, in an impecunious state, I have recently renewed a subscription.

Though I find much I like elsewhere, when I must choose just one, I have retained my subscription to *Asimov's* because it gives me the broadest range of daring fiction. Actually, I read more stories in *Asimov's* I don't like than some other places, but I read more I find exceptional too and more diversity in those. To me, this very diversity, including the choices I consider mistakes, bespeaks the editorial courage to seek genuine creative work. We all can appreciate Gardner's talent. I believe you appreciate (beneath the mountain of verbiage you must daily deal with) the privilege to have the audience *Asimov's* does to allow such substantive fare. It reassures me that there *are* a hundred thousand people who read *Asimov's*.

Well, what about book publishing? Jeff VanderMeer, whose "The Bone-Carver's Tale" in that same issue I found beautiful and moving, asked me in a letter I received right while reading that issue of *Asimov's*, whose fiction I read . . . besides Don Webb, Mark Rich, and others we both know we both like. I found I had difficulty responding because he'd likely never heard of a lot of what I read and like. Why? Because a lot of it comes from small publishers and contains references sufficiently local or personal that its audience may be limited . . . until or unless exposure builds a larger audience.

My perception is that these turbulent times are generating a *lot* of really interesting writing. If commercial requirements of the literary center encourage shallow stagnation, all sorts of creative shoots are springing up in the cultural and literary margins. There's much of little interest to anyone in small publishing.—There's much of little interest to anyone in *all* publishing, and the commercial publishers do impose a discipline, coherent because conventional and therefore familiar, of basic competence, unlike smaller publishers whose standards vary far more in both quality *and* content.

Yet I find there are small publishers: Amador of Albuquerque, Mother Bird of Silver City, N. M., and Bastille of Saco, Maine to name three, nearly all of whose offerings can hold my interest, can artfully impart new views to me or

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participate with me in intelligent consideration of questions that I believe matter.

Perhaps our culture is degenerating from a monolithic Tower of Babel to mutually barely intelligible local (in space or cyberspace) forms, perhaps even to forms that depend more on shared personal exchange than culture has since the development of mass forms. All things considered, that could be hardly surprising in view of monolithic culture's paralysis. Both for cultural coherence (on which such basic stuff as getting food to the populace by market *or* fiat rests) and for writers (or anyone) trying to earn a living, the prospect is scary. But amidst the chaos, I see no shortage of creative spark. . . . Just, a lot of the most interesting may indeed speak to limited audience.

—Of course, *Asimov's* has a limited audience. I know this because, when I visited your offices the security guard at the building's entrance had never heard of *Asimov's*. He had to look up Sheila in his directory to call before letting me in.—My funny name didn't bother him since I was expected. He seemed both bright and to have a good sense of humor actually. But he had never heard of the world's largest-circulation primarily fiction SF magazine housed in the building where he worked. Weird. Yet from a writer's point of view, a hundred thousand is a *good* audience. . . . Which makes the paradox of how good, substantive fiction gets from writer to reader only the stranger. I find there's lots of good stuff out there. But how and how many it *can* communicate to . . . damned if I know.

Please keep the thoughtful stuff coming. Glad you're there.
All best,

Uncle River
Blue, AZ

Dear Editor,

I'm writing in response to a letter which appeared in the April 1995 anniversary issue from Rich Gorsuch, Ph.D. Dr. Gorsuch wrote a serious, heartfelt letter, wherein he basically complained that *Asimov's* stories were not always true science fiction, which is science-based, you learn something from it, etc., and that many stories these days were of a new type that frequently had "irrelevant detail" and "depressing endings."

I disagree. My view of "true science fiction" is drastically different. I thought science fiction encompassed anything from "hard" science, such as *Raft,* by Steven Baxter; to alternate history, such as *Guns of the South,* by Harry Turtledove, to "after-the-apocalypse" novels such as *The Postman,* by David Brin. Mr. Gorsuch would seem to only pick *Raft* as genuine science fiction out of these three novels. I never heard anyone postulate that you must learn something from a science fiction story, or that it must be science-based. I thought that many or most people who write science fiction did so because it freed them from the bonds that "mainstream" fiction writers

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must work under. That's why it's also called "speculative" fiction.

As far as the "new norm" of stories he spoke on in some detail, I barely know what he was speaking of. It's true that short stories fairly often don't have enough of a plot, or a conclusive ending, but that situation is not confined only to science fiction and fantasy. Mainstream short stories are often like this. I don't exactly know what the "irrelevant detail" part was. As far as depressing endings, I don't know that I notice any more stories of that type than I did ten years ago. And besides, so what? It's just fiction.

Finally, even though *Asimov's* subtitle is "Science Fiction," they have printed the occasional fantasy stories for some time. I like ALL forms of science fiction, not just "hard" science. For me, the umbrella over the field is simply much larger, and I think many readers feel the same way.

DeWitt Henderson
Los Alamos National Laboratory
Los Alamos, NM

Dear Gardner:

Just a short note to let you know that "The Fragrance of Orchids," (*Asimov's*, May 1994) just won Canada's Aurora Award for best short fiction. I'm pleased as can be about it, and wanted to sincerely thank you for the opportunity to publish my story in your magazine. Thanks again,

Sally McBride
Victoria, BC
Canada

Dear Editor,

After the greed-is-good, kick-'em-when-they're-down trend of the last fifteen years, I was troubled by Robert Silverberg's referring to those of us who have homes as "the housebroken portion of the population" in the May Reflections column, "Gold Doesn't Smell." I hope I'm merely mistaking his intentions—it would be nice if that were true—but I worry.

It *is* difficult (as Barbara Ehrenreich pointed out in a very funny book called *The Worst Years of Our Lives*) to stay sweet and fresh when you're living in a plastic bag and you have as much chance of being admitted to a restaurant or store (or even the public library) as you have of flying to the moon. Contempt for that fact—of which we've seen a good deal in the last fifteen years—is the context of Silverberg's phrase. He is not, of course, responsible for the context, but as I said, I worry. I've done some pretty bad things inadvertently myself and have been, quite rightly, rapped across the knuckles for it. I would love to hear that in this matter, I am plain wrong.

I'm sorry if I'm reacting to something not intended, but there has been too much snubbing of ill or unlucky people as somehow subhuman, and the orgy of self-congratulation that usually accompanies that view. I would like to believe that sterling Silverberg is on the side of the angels.

Dickens is getting to be a little too contemporary for comfort. But then he was poor, as a child. Two

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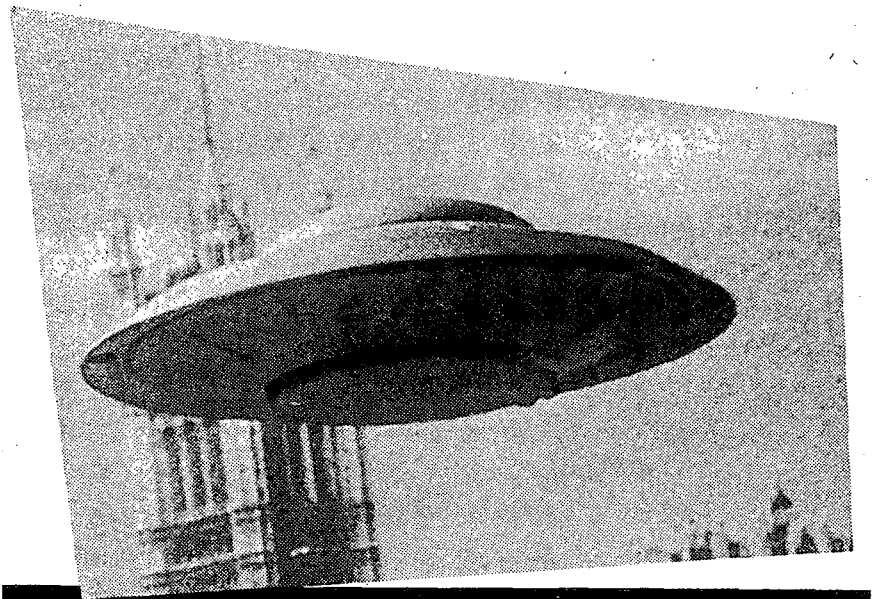

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of my dearest friends have been on welfare. One was homeless when, far from her family, a job she'd been promised evaporated. Times were better then. There but for the grace of God &c.
Sincerely,

Joanna Russ
Tucson, AZ

Dear *Asimov's*,

You know, the symbolism of Pamela Sargent's June story "Amphibians" might have been more powerful (or at least less distracting) if the author had recalled that turtles are REPTILES!

On the other hand, "Thorri the Poet's Saga" was great—and certainly redeemed your pages where "accuracy" is concerned. Hope to see more of this duo's work!

And if you're bucking for an "*Asimov's* poster," you're probably going to get a lot of requests for that gorgeous July cover! Wow!
Faithfully,

Moira Allen
Olympia, WA

Everyone at *Asimov's*:

I've finally gotten around to reading the June issue of *Asimov's*, and I am impressed, as usual, with the consistent quality of the writing that appears in your pages. I can't get enough of Brian Stableford, and I would certainly like to see more of Virginia Baker's works in the future. The stories of Landis, Boyett, and Kelly, and the poetry of William John Watkins appearing this month are also thought-provoking and well worth my time. Pamela Sargent's story, "Amphibians," is a well-written piece, save for one major flaw: turtles, the only animals other than humans appearing in the story, are biologically classified as reptiles, not amphibians. This mistake can be overlooked on the other merits of the story, but in the future, I'd suggest you watch out for stuff like that a little more carefully.
Sincerely,

Ryan Williams
from the Internet

Pamela Sargent replies:

Having studied biology in college, I'm well aware that turtles are reptiles, but also that the particular turtles I was writing about are in fact amphibious. Therefore, the title of my story "Amphibians" seems entirely appropriate on factual as well as symbolic grounds.

As support for this, I refer readers to The Reptile and Amphibian Keeper's Dictionary: An A-Z of Herpetoloty *by David C. Wareham (London: Blandford, 1993), a handy guide to terminology for those of us who are interested in reptilian and amphibious creatures. An entry on page 22: "AMPHIBIOUS: Able to occupy both land and water. Usually used to describe the lives of most amphibians but is equally appropriate to semi-aquatic chelonians, crocodilians and certain snakes and lizards." Among the "semi-aquatic chelonians" are the species of freshwater turtles who play a role in my story.*

There are perhaps three ways I

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might have avoided these complaints about "Amphibians." One of my characters might have said (or thought) at some point: "Those turtles are actually amphibious reptiles, not amphibians." But this would have been completely out of character for these people in this particular story. I could have changed the title to "Amphibious Reptiles," which would have been ludicrous. Or—and this is something I did consider—I could have used amphibians such as frogs in the story instead of turtles. I rejected that alternative on psychological grounds: "Amphibians" is heavily autobiographical, and turtles were the creatures my father and I often rowed out to see. "Amphibians" was written exactly ten years after my father's death, and I wanted them in my story. A writer learns to trust her unconscious on such matters.

There is respect for accuracy, and there is literal-mindedness; unfortunately some people can't tell the difference. I prefer to think that most readers have some subtlety. At least Ryan Williams, to his credit, seems to recognize that there is more to a work of fiction than a literal-minded and thoughtless adherence to facts.

Very truly yours,

Pamela Sargent
Johnson City, NY

Dear Ms. Williams,

I would like to express to you—and through you to Mr. Dozois, and your readership at large—my thanks and great appreciation for selecting me as part of your Readers' Choice roster. For a poet, this kind of confirmation, this validation, is very, very welcome. Poetry is kind of a message in a bottle—it's rare and wonderful to have anything at all float back to you. And then, when it's something like this—well, I'm overwhelmed. Thank you, again and again and again.

Respectfully,

Greg Stewart
Los Angeles, CA

Dear Editors,

A few months ago you put a coupon in your magazine for Isaac Asimov's autobiography. I wish you would tell your subscribers how to obtain other books by Dr. Asimov.

Yours truly,

Lois F. Fleming
Humboldt, IL

Thanks for your letter about the work of Isaac Asimov. While the original hardcover editions of his books are out of print, reasonably priced specially produced hardcover editions (four-color preprinted cover, printed endpapers of four of his best-known titles [Pebble in the Sky; Foundation; I, Robot; *and* Forward the Foundation]) *may be ordered from Bantam Doubleday Dell Direct. You can order individual titles for $12.99 each (plus shipping and handling), or the four-title set for just $39.99 (plus s & h). For complete details, call the BDD Direct toll-free number—1-(800)-299-1069.* ***Quantities are limited.***

—Sheila Williams

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Walter Jon Williams

FOREIGN DEVILS

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"Foreign Devils" celebrates the hundredth anniversary of H.G. Wells's classic tale of alien invasion. Later this year the story will be reprinted in a collection, *War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches* (Bantam), that commemorates that remarkable event. The paperback edition of the author's latest novel, *Metropolitan,* will be out soon from HarperPrism. Mr. Williams is currently working on the sequel.

Illustration by Ron Chironna

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There is no longer anyone alive who knows her name.

She has always been known by her titles, titles related to the role she was expected to play. When she was sixteen and had been chosen as a minor concubine for the Son of Heaven, she had been called Lady Yehenara, because she was born in the Yehe tribe of the Nara clan of the great Manchu race. After she had given birth to an imperial heir, she had been called I Kuei-fei—Concubine of Feminine Virtue. Later, after her husband died and she assumed the regency for their son, she was given the title Tzu Hsi, Empress of the West, because she once lived in a pavilion on the western side of the Forbidden City.

But no one alive knows her real name, the milk-name her mother had given her almost sixty-five years ago, the name she had answered to when she was young and happy and free from care. Her real name is unimportant.

Only her position matters, and it is a lonely one.

She lives in a world of imperial yellow. The wall hangings are yellow, the carpets are yellow, and she wears a gown of crackling yellow brocade. She sleeps on yellow brocade sheets, and rests her head on pillows of yellow silk beneath embroidered yellow bed curtains.

Now Peking is on fire, and the hangings of yellow silk are stained with the red of burning.

She rises from her bed in the Hour of the Rat, a little after midnight. Her working day, and that of the Emperor, begins early.

A eunuch braids her hair while her ladies—all of them young, and all of them in gowns of blue—help her to dress. She wears a yellow satin gown embroidered with pink flowers, and a cape ornamented with four thousand pearls. The eunuch expertly twists her braided hair into a topknot, and fits over it a headdress made of jade adorned on either side with fresh flowers. Gold sheaths protect the two long fingernails of her right hand, and jade sheaths protect the two long fingernails of her left. Her prize black lion dogs frolic around her feet.

The smell of burning floats into the room, detectable above the scent of her favorite Nine-Buddha Incense. The burning scent imparts a certain urgency to the proceedings, but her toilette cannot be completed in haste.

At last she is ready. She calls for her sedan chair and retinue—Li Lien-Ying, the Chief Eunuch, the Second Chief Eunuch, four Eunuchs of the Fifth Rank, twelve Eunuchs of the Sixth Rank, plus eight more eunuchs to carry the chair.

"Take me to the Emperor's apartments," she says.

The sedan chair swoops gently upward as the eunuchs lift it to their shoulders. As she leaves her pavilion, she hears the sound of the sentries saluting her as she passes.

They are not *her* sentries. These elite troops of the Tiger-Hunt Marks-

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men are not here to keep anyone *out*. They are in the employ of ambitious men, and the guards serve only to keep her a prisoner in her own palace.

Despite her titles, despite the blue-clad ladies and the eunuchs and the privileges, despite the silk and brocade and pearls, the Empress of the West is a captive. She can think of no way that she can escape.

The litter's yellow brocade curtains part for a moment, and the empress catches a brief glimpse of the sky. There is Mars, glowing high in the sky like a red lantern, and below it streaks a falling star, a beautiful ribbon of imperial yellow against the velvet night. It streaks east to west, and then is gone.

Perhaps, she thinks, it is a hopeful sign.

The audience room smells of burning. Yellow brocade crackles as the members of the Family Council perform their ritual kowtows before the Son of Heaven. Before they present their petitions to the Emperor they pause, as they realize from his flushed face and sudden intake of breath that he is having an orgasm as he sits in his dragon-embroidered robes upon his yellow-draped chair.

The Emperor Kuang Hsu is twenty-eight years old, and has suffered from severe health problems his entire life. Sometimes, in moments of tension, he succumbs to a sudden fit of orgasm. The doctors claim it is the result of a kidney malady, but no matter how many Kidney Rectifying Pills and gold coated cinnabar the Emperor is made to swallow, his condition never improves.

The illness is sometimes embarrassing, but the family has become accustomed to it.

After the Emperor's breathing returns to normal, Prince Jung Lu presents his petition. "Your majesty," he says, "for three days the Righteous Harmony Fists have rioted in the Tatar City and the Chinese City. There are no less than thirty thousand of these disreputable scoundrels in Peking. They have set fire to the home of Grand Secretary Hsu Tung and to many others. Grand Secretary Sun Chia-nai has been assaulted and robbed. As the Supreme Ones of the past safeguarded the tranquility of the realm by issuing edicts to suppress rebellion and disorder, and as the Righteous Harmony Fists have shown themselves violent, disorderly, and disrespectful of your majesty's servants, I hope that an edict from your majesty will soon be forthcoming that allows this unworthy person to use the Military Guards Army to suppress disorder."

Prince Tuan spits tobacco into his pocket spittoon. "I beg the favor of disagreeing with the esteemed prince," he says. Other officials, members of his Iron Hat Faction, murmur their agreement.

The Dowager Empress, sitting on her yellow cushion next to the Emperor, looks from one to the other, and feels only despair.

Jung Lu has been her friend from childhood. He is a moderate and sen-

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sible man, but the situation that envelopes them all is neither moderate nor sensible.

It is Prince Tuan, a younger man, bulky in his brocade court costume and with the famous Shangfang Sword strapped to his waist, who is in command of the situation. He and his allies—Tuan's brother Duke Lan, Prince Chuang of the Gendarmerie, the Grand Councillor Kang I, Chao Shu-chiao of the Board of Punishments—form the core of those Iron Hats who had seized power two years ago, at the end of the Hundred Days Reform.

It is Tuan who has surrounded the Dragon Throne with his personal army of ten thousand Tiger-Hunt Marksmen. It is Tuan who controls the ferocious Muslim cavalry of General Tung, his ally, camped in the gardens south of the city. It is Tuan who extorted the honor of carrying the Shangfang Sword in the imperial presence, and with it the right to use the sword to execute anyone on the spot, for any reason. And it is Tuan's son, Pu Chun, who has been made heir to the throne.

It is Prince Tuan, and the others of his Iron Hat Faction, who have encouraged the thousands of martial artists and spirit warriors of the Righteous Harmony Fists to invade Peking, to attack Chinese Christians and others against whom they have a grudge, and who threaten to envelop China in a war with all the foreign powers at once.

The young Emperor, Kuang Hsu, opens his mouth but cannot say a word. He has a bad stammer, and in stressful situations he cannot speak at all.

Prince Tuan fills the silence. "I am certain that, should the Son of Heaven deign to address us, he would assure us of his confidence in the patriotism and loyalty of the Righteous Harmony Fists. His majesty knows that any disorders are incidental, and that the Righteous Harmony Fists are united in their desire to rid the Middle Kingdom of the Foreign Devils that oppress our nation.

"In the past," he continues, getting to his point—for in the Imperial Court, one always presents conclusions by invoking the past—"In the past, the great rulers of the Middle Kingdom established order in their dominions by calling upon their loyal subjects to do away with foreign influences and causes of disorder. If his majesty will only issue an edict to this effect, the Righteous Harmony Fists can use their martial powers and their invincible magic to sweep the Foreign Devils from our land."

The Emperor attempts again to speak and again fails. This time it is the Dowager Empress who fills the silence.

"Will such an edict not bring us to war with all the Foreign Devils at once? We have never been able to hold off even one foreign power at a time. The white ghosts of England and France, and even lately the dwarf-bandits of Japan, have all won concessions from us."

Prince Tuan scowls, and his hand tightens on the Shangfang Sword.

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"The Righteous Harmony Fists are not members of the imperial forces. They are merely righteous citizens stirred to anger by the actions of the Foreign Devils and the Secondary Foreign Devils, the Christian converts. The government cannot be held responsible for their actions. And besides—the Righteous Harmony Fists are invulnerable. You have seen yourself, a few weeks ago, when I brought one of their members into this room and fired a pistol straight at him. He was not harmed."

The Empress of the West falls silent as clouds of doubt enter her mind. She had seen the pistol fired, and the man had taken no hurt. It had been an impressive demonstration.

"I regret to report to the Throne," Jung Lu says, "of an unfortunate incident in the city. The German ambassador, von Ketteler, personally opened fire on a group of Righteous Harmony Fists peacefully exercising in the open. He killed seven and wounded many more."

"An outrage!" Prince Tuan cries.

"Truly," Jung Lu says, "but unfortunately the Righteous Harmony Fists proved somewhat less than invulnerable to von Ketteler's bullets. Perhaps their invincibility has been overstated."

Prince Tuan glares sullenly at Jung Lu. He bites his lip, then says, "It is the fault of wicked Chinese Christian women. The Secondary Foreign Devils flaunted their naked private parts through windows, and the Righteous Harmony Fists lost their strength."

There is a thoughtful pause as the others absorb this information. And then the Emperor opens his mouth again.

The Emperor has, for the moment, mastered his speech impediment, though his gaunt young face is strained with effort and there are long, breathy pauses between each word. "Our subjects depend on the Dragon Throne for their safety," he gasps. "Prince Jung Lu is ordered to restore order in the city and to stand between the foreign legations and the Righteous Harmony Fists . . . to prevent further incidents."

Kuang Hsu falls back on his yellow cushions, exhausted from the effort to speak. "The Son of Heaven is wise," Jung Lu says.

"Truly," says Prince Tuan, his eyes narrowing.

Using appropriate formal language, and of course invoking the all-important precedents from the past, court scribes write the edict in Manchurian, then translate the words into Chinese. The Dowager Empress holds the Chinese translation to her failing eyes and reads it with care. As a female, she had not been judged worthy of education until she had been chosen as an imperial concubine. She has never learned more than a few hundred characters of Chinese, and is unable to read Manchurian at all.

But whether she can read and write or not, her position as Empress Dowager gives her the power of veto over any Imperial edict. It is important that she view any document personally.

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"Everything is in order," she ventures to guess.

The Imperial Seal Eunuch inks the heavy Imperial Seal and presses it to the edict, and with ceremony the document is presented to Prince Jung Lu. Prince Tuan draws himself up and speaks. "This insignificant person must beg the Throne for permission to deal with this German, von Ketterer. This white ghost is killing Chinese at random, for his own amusement, and in the confused circumstances none can be blamed if there is an accident."

The Empress of the West and the Emperor exchange quick glances. Perhaps, thinks the Empress, it is best to let Prince Tuan win a point. It may assuage his blood lust for the moment.

And she very much doubts anyone will miss the German ambassador.

She tilts her head briefly, an affirmative gesture. The Emperor's eyes flicker as he absorbs her import.

"We leave it to you," he says. It is a ritual form of assent, the throne's formal permission for an action to take place.

"The Supreme One's brilliance and sagacity exceeds all measure," says Prince Tuan.

The family council ends. The royal princes make their kowtows and leave the chamber.

The Empress Dowager leaves her chair and approaches her nephew, the Emperor. He seems shrunken in his formal dragon robes—he has twenty-eight sets of robes altogether, one auspicious for each day of the lunar month. Tenderly the Dowager dabs sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. He reaches into his sleeve for a lighter and a packet of Turkish cigarets.

"We won't win, you know," he sighs. His stammer has disappeared along with his formidable, intimidating relations. "If we couldn't beat the Japanese dwarf-bandits, we can't beat anybody. We're just going to lose more territory to the Foreign Devils, just as we've already lost Burma, Nepal, Indochina, Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, all the treaty ports we've had to cede to Foreign Devils . . ."

"You don't believe the spirit fighters' magic will help us?"

The Emperor laughs and draws on his cigaret. "Cheap tricks to impress peasants. I have seen that bullet-catching trick done by conjurers."

"We must delay. Delay as long as possible. If we delay, the correct path may become clear."

The Emperor flicks cigaret ash off his yellow sleeve. His tone is bitter. "Delay is the only possible course for those who have no power. Very well. We will delay as long as possible. But delay the war or not, we will still lose."

Tears well in the old woman's eyes. It is all, she knows, her fault.

Her husband, the Emperor, had died of grief after losing the Second Opium War to the Foreign Devils. Their child was only an infant at the

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HOME UPDATE

Tall man travels the world—finds the perfect shower for everyone!

Revolutionary shower head with fully adjustable arm and extra-large shower head puts an end to stooping over in the shower to get your hair wet!

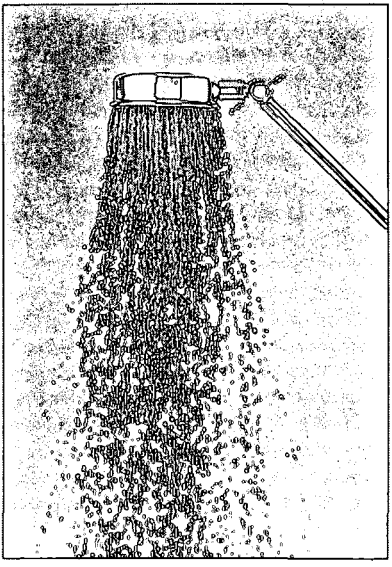
by Rocky Holman

Has this ever happened to you? Do you get in the shower and hit your head on the shower head? Or do you have to bend and twist to get your hair wet? I'm 6'2" and suffer from these daily hassles with taking a shower. What should be a painless daily routine turns into a headache for me—literally! One day I decided to do something about it—search for the tall man's shower head!

Tall man's shower head. Determined, I searched the world over for this ideal shower head. When I traveled to Australia, I found the shower head of my dreams—*The Down Under Wonder*! This unusually large shower head contains 127 holes that cause a downpour effect. A fully adjustable arm raises and lowers the pivoting shower head over a 20" range. It's perfect for tall people or people with special needs. Plus, a heavy-gauge solid brass construction with chrome finish ensures you years of trouble-free use.

The Down Under Wonder is perfect for tall people or people with special needs. You'll never stoop over or hit your head in the shower again!

Now available to the public! I was so impressed that I decided to import *The Down Under Wonder* to the United States. No more stooping over to wet your hair! No more shower caps! No more bumping your head! Now even tall people can take showers without any hassles or restrictions!



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time. She did her best to bring up her son, engaging the most rigorous and moral of teachers, but after reigning for only a few years her son had died at the age of eighteen from exhaustion brought on by unending sexual dissipation.

Since then she has devoted her life to caring for her nephew, the new Emperor. She had rescued Kuang Hsu from her sister, who had beaten him savagely and starved him—one of his brothers had actually been starved to death—but she had erred again in choosing the young Emperor's companions. He had been so bullied by eunuchs, so plagued by ill health, and so intimidated by his tutors and the blustering royal princes, that he had remained shy, hesitant, and self-conscious. He had only acted decisively once, two years ago, during the Hundred Days' Reform, and that had ended badly, with the palace surrounded by Prince Tuan's Tiger-Hunt Marksmen and the Emperor held captive.

"I will leave your majesty to rest," she says. He looks at her, not unkindly.

"Thank you, mother," he says.

Tears prickle the dowager's eyes. Even though she has betrayed him, still he calls her "mother" instead of "aunt."

She walks from the room, and with her twenty-four attending eunuchs returns to her palace.

Alone in the darkness of the litter, no one sees the tears that patter on the yellow brocade cushions.

"All the news is good," Prince Tuan says. "One of our soldiers, a Manchu bannerman named Enhai, has shot the German ambassador outside the Tsungli Yamen. Admiral Seymour's Foreign Devils, marching up the railway line from Tientsin, have turned back after a battle with the Righteous Harmony Fists."

"I had heard the Righteous Harmony Fists had all been killed," says Jung Lu. "Where was their bullet-catching magic?"

"Their magic was sufficient to turn back Admiral Seymour," Prince Tuan retorts.

"He may have just gone back for reinforcements. More and more foreign warships are appearing off Tientsin."

It is the Hour of the Ox, just before dawn. Several days have passed since Prince Jung Lu was ordered to seal off the foreign legations. This has reduced the number of incidents in the city, though the Foreign Devils continue their distressing habit of shooting any Chinese they see, sometimes using machine guns on crowds. Since no one is attacking them, the foreigners' behavior is puzzling. Jung Lu sent several peace delegations to inquire their reasons, but the delegates had all been shot down as soon as they appeared in sight of the legations. Jung Lu has been forced to admit that the foreigners may no longer be be-

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having rationally.

"In the past," Prince Tuan says, "Heaven made known its wishes through the movements of the stars and planets and through portents displayed in the skies. This unworthy servant reminds the Throne that this is a year with an extra intercalary month, and therefore a year that promises unusual occurrences. This is also a Kengtze year, which occurs only every ten years. Therefore the Heavens demonstrate the extraordinary nature of this year, and require that all inhabitants of the Earth assist Heaven in creating extraordinary happenings."

"I have not heard that Kengtze years were lucky for the Pure Dynasty," Jung Lu remarks. But Prince Tuan doesn't even slow down.

"There are other indications that war is at hand," he says. "The red planet Mars is high in the Heavens, and the ancients spoke truly when they declared, 'When Mars is high, prepare for war and civil strife; when Mars sinks below the horizon, send the soldiers home.'

"But there is another indication more decisive than any of these. Heaven has declared its will by dropping meteors upon the Middle Kingdom. Three falling stars have landed outside of Tientsin. Another three landed south of the capital near Yungtsing. According to the office of Telegraph Sheng, three have also landed in Shangtung, three more southwest of Shanghai, and three near Kwangtung."

The Empress Dowager and the Emperor exchange glances. Several of these falling meteors have been observed from the palace, and their significance discussed. But reports of meteors landing in threes throughout eastern China are new.

"Heaven is declaring its will!" Prince Tuan says. "The meteors have all landed near places where there are large concentrations of Foreign Devils! Obviously Heaven wishes us to exterminate these vermin!"

Tuan gives a triumphant laugh, and draws the Shangfang Sword. The Emperor turns pale and shrinks into his heavy brocade robes.

"I demand an edict from the Dragon Throne!" Tuan shouts. "Let the Son of Heaven command that all Foreign Devils be killed!"

The Emperor tries to speak, but terror has plainly seized his tongue. Choosing her words carefully, the Empress Dowager speaks in his place. *Delay,* she thinks.

"We will consult the auspices and act wisely in accordance with their wishes."

Prince Tuan gives a roar of anger and brandishes the sword. "No more delay! Heaven has made its will clear! If you don't issue the edicts, I'll do it myself!"

There is a moment of horrified silence. The Emperor's face turns stony as he looks at Prince Tuan. Sweat pops onto his brow with the effort to control his tongue.

"W-w-why," he stammers, "don't you go k-k-k-kill yourself?"

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There is another moment of silence. Prince Tuan coldly forces a smile onto his face.

"The Son of Heaven makes a very amusing witticism," he says.

And then, at swordpoint, he commands the Imperial Seal Eunuch to bring out the heavy seal that will confirm his edicts.

As she watches, the Empress Dowager's heart floods with sorrow.

It is the Hour of the Tiger, two days after Prince Tuan seized control. A red dawn provides a scarlet blush to the yellow hangings. Tuan and his allies confer before the Dragon Throne. Tuan has brought his son, the imperial heir Pu Chun, to watch his father as he commands the fate of China. The boy spends most of his time practicing martial arts, pretending to skewer Foreign Devils with his sword.

The Emperor, disgusted, smokes a cigaret behind a wall-hanging. No one bothers to ask his opinion of the edicts that are going out under his seal.

The Righteous Harmony Fists have all been drafted into the army and sent to reinforce General Nieh, standing between Tientsin and the capital. Governors have been ordered to defend their provinces against attack. Jung Lu's army has been ordered to wipe out the foreigners in the legation quarter, but so far he has found reason to delay.

Can China fight the whole world? the Empress Dowager wonders.

But she sits on her yellow cushion, and smokes her water pipe, and plays with her little lion dogs while she pretends unconcern. It is all she can do.

A messenger arrives and hands to Jung Lu a pair of messages from the office of Telegraph Sheng, and Jung Lu reads them with a puzzled expression. He approaches the Empress, leans close, and speaks in a low tone.

"The Foreign Devils off Tientsin have ordered our troops to evacuate the Taku Forts by midnight—that is midnight yesterday, so the ultimatum has already expired."

Anxiety grips the Empress's heart. "Can our troops hold the forts?"

Jung Lu frowns. "Their record is not good."

If the Taku Forts fall, the Empress knows, Tientsin will fall. And once Tientsin falls, it is but a short march from there to Peking. It has all happened before.

Sick at heart, the Empress remembers the headlong flight from the capital during the Second Opium War, how her happy, innocent little lion dogs had been thrown down wells rather than let the Foreign Devils capture them.

It is going to happen again, she thinks.

Prince Tuan marches toward them. Hearing his steps, Jung Lu's face turns to a mask. He hides the first message in his sleeve.

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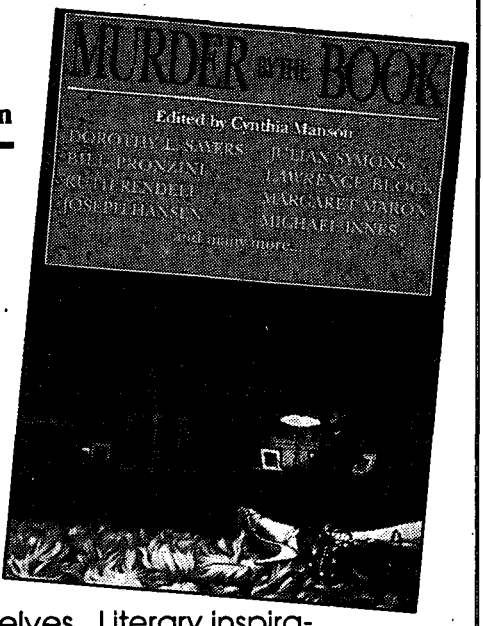

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"This insignificant person hopes the mighty commander of the Military Guards Army will share his news," Tuan says.

Jung Lu hands Tuan the second of the two messages. "Confused news of fighting south of Tientsin. Some towns have been destroyed—the message says by monsters that rode to earth on meteors, but obviously the message was confused. Perhaps he meant to say that meteors have landed on some towns."

"Were they Christian towns?" Tuan asks. "Perhaps Heaven's vengeance is falling on the Secondary Foreign Devils. There are many Christians around Tientsin."

"The message does not say."

Prince Tuan looks at the message and spits into his pocket spittoon. "It probably doesn't matter," he says.

It is the Hour of the Snake. Bright morning sun blazes on the room's yellow hangings. A lengthy dispatch has arrived from the office of Telegraph Sheng. Prince Tuan reads it, then laughs and swaggers toward the captive Emperor.

"This miserable one regrets to report to the Throne that last night an allied force of Foreign Devils captured the forts at Taku," he says.

Then why are you smiling? the Empress wonders, and takes a slow, deliberate puff of smoke from her water pipe while she strives to control her alarm.

"Are steps being taken to rectify the situation?" asks the Emperor.

Tuan's smile broadens. "Heaven, which is just, has acted on behalf of the Son of Heaven. The Foreign Devils, their armies, and their fleets have been destroyed!"

The Empress exchanges glances with her nephew. The Emperor gives a puzzled frown as he absorbs the information. "Please tell us what has occurred," he says.

"The armies of the Foreign Devils were preparing to advance on Tientsin from Taku," Prince Tuan says, "when a force of metal giants appeared from the south. The Foreign Devils were obliterated! Their armies were destroyed by a blast of fire, and then their warships!"

"I fail to understand . . ." the Empress begins.

"It's obvious!" Prince Tuan says. "The metal giants rode from Heaven to earth on meteors! The Jade Emperor must have sent them expressly to destroy the Foreign Devils."

"Perhaps our information is incomplete," Jung Lu says cautiously.

Prince Tuan laughs. "Read the dispatch yourself," he says, and carelessly shoves the long telegram into the older man's hands.

The Emperor looks from one to the other, suspicion plain on his face. He clearly does not know whether to believe the news, or whether he wants to believe.

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"We will wait for confirmation," he says.

More dispatches arrive over the course of the day. The destruction of the foreign armies and fleets is confirmed. Confused news of fighting comes from other areas where meteors are known to have landed. Giants are mentioned, as are bronze tripods. Prince Tuan and other members of his Iron Hat Faction swagger in triumph, boasting of the destruction of all the Foreign Devils. Pu Chun, the imperial heir, skips about the room in delight, pretending he is a giant and kicking imaginary armies out of his path.

It is the Hour of the Monkey. Supper dishes have been brought into the audience chamber and the council members eat as they view the dispatches.

"The report from Tientsin says that the city is on fire," Jung Lu reports. "The message is unfinished. Apparently something happened to the telegraph office, or perhaps the wires were cut."

Kuang Hsu scowls. His face is etched with tension, and he speaks only with difficulty. "Tientsin is a city filled with our loyal subjects. If they are on our side, how is it that the Falling Star Giants are destroying a Chinese city?"

"There are many Foreign Devils in Tientsin," Prince Tuan says. "Perhaps it was necessary to destroy the entire city in order to eradicate the foreign influence."

A look of disgust passes across the Emperor's face at this casual attitude toward his subjects. He opens his mouth to speak, but then a spasm crosses his face. He flushes in shame.

The others in the room politely turn their gaze to the wall hangings while the Emperor has an orgasm.

Afterward he cannot speak at all. He fumbles with his soiled dragon robes as he walks behind the hangings in order to smoke a cigaret.

Despair fills the Dowager Empress as she watches his attempt to regain his dignity.

Over the next two days, messages continue to arrive. Telegraph offices in the major cities are destroyed, and soon the only available information comes from horsemen galloping to the capital from local commanders and provincial governors.

General Nieh's army, stationed between Peking and Tientsin, has been wiped out by Falling Star Giants, along with most of the Righteous Harmony Fists that had been sent as reinforcements. Their spirit magic has proved inadequate to the occasion. From the inadequate information available it would seem that Shanghai, Tsingtao, and Canton have been attacked and very possibly destroyed. Just south of Peking, in Hopeh, three Falling Star Giants have been causing unimaginable destruction in

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one of China's richest provinces, and Hopeh's governor has committed suicide after he admitted to the Throne his inability to control the situation.

The Empress Dowager notes that the Iron Hats' swaggering is noticeably reduced.

"Perhaps it is time," says Jung Lu, "to examine the possibility that the Falling Star Giants are just another kind of Foreign Devil, as rapacious as the first, and more powerful."

"Nonsense," says Prince Tuan automatically. "Heaven has sent the Falling Star Giants to aid us." But he looks uncertain as he says it.

It is the Hour of the Sheep. The midday sun beats down on the capital, turning even the shady gardens of the Forbidden City into broiling ovens.

The Emperor struggles with his tongue. "W-we desire that the august prince Jung Lu continue."

Jung Lu is happy to oblige. "This unworthy servant begs the Throne to recall that General Nieh and the Righteous Harmony Fists were neither Foreign Devils nor Christians, and they were destroyed. There are few Foreign Devils or Secondary Foreign Devils in Hopeh, but the massacres there have been terrible. And everywhere the Falling Star Giants appear, many more Chinese than Foreign Devils have been killed." Jung Lu looks solemn. "I regret the necessity to alert the Throne to a dangerous possibility. If the Falling Star Giants advance west up the railway line from Tientsin, and simultaneously march north from Hopeh, Peking will be caught between two forces. I must sadly recommend that we consider the defense of the capital."

The Empress Dowager glances at Prince Tuan, expecting him to contradict this suggestion, but instead the prince only gnaws his lip and looks uncertain.

A little flame of hope kindles in the Empress's heart.

The Emperor also sees Tuan's uncertainty, and presses his advantage while he can. "Has the commander of the Military Guards Army any suggestions to make?" he asks.

"From the reports available," Jung Lu says, "it would seem that the Falling Star Giants have two weapons. The first is a beam of heat that incinerates all that it touches. This we call the Fire of the Meteor, from the flame of a falling star, and it is used to defeat armies and fleets. The second weapon is a poison black smoke that is fired from rockets. This we call the Tail of the Meteor, from a falling star's smoky tail, and it is used against cities, smothering the entire population."

"These weapons are not new," says a new voice. It is old Kang I, the Grand Councillor.

Kang I is a relic of a former age. In his many years he has served four Emperors, and in his rigid adherence to tradition and hatred of foreign-

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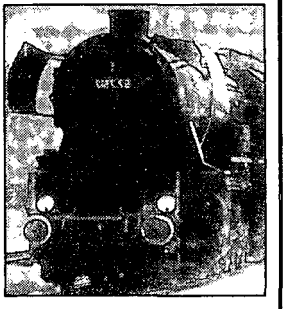

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ers has joined the Iron Hats from pure conviction.

Kang I spits into his pocket spittoon and speaks in a loud voice. "This worthless one begs the Throne to recall the Heng Ha Erh Chiang, the Door Gods. At the famous Battle of Mu between the Yin and the Chou, Marshal Cheng Lung was known as Heng the Snorter, because when he snorted, two beams of light shot from his nostrils and incinerated the enemy. Likewise, Marshal Ch'en Chi was known as Ha the Blower, because he was able to blow out clouds of poisonous yellow gas that smothered his foe.

"Thus it is clear," he concludes, "that these weapons were invented centuries ago in China, and must subsequently have been stolen by the Falling Star Giants, who are obviously a worthless and imitative people, like all foreigners." He falls silent, a superior smile ghosting across his face.

The Empress finds herself intrigued by this anecdote. "Does the esteemed councillor know if the historical records offer a method of defeating these weapons?"

"Indeed. Heng the Snorter was killed by a spear, and Ha the Blower by a magic bezoar spat at him by an ox-spirit."

"We have many spears," Jung Lu says softly. "But this ignorant one confesses his bafflement concerning where a suitable ox-spirit may be obtained. Perhaps the esteemed Grand Councillor has a suggestion?"

The smile vanishes from Kang I's face. "All answers may be found in the annals," he says stonily.

The Emperor, admirably controlling any impulse to smile at the Iron Hat's discomfort, turns again to Jung Lu. "Does the illustrious prince have any suggestions?"

"We have only three forces near Peking," Jung Lu says. "Of these, my Military Guards Army is fully occupied in blockading the foreign legations here in Peking. General Tung's horsemen are already in a position to move eastward to Tientsin. This leaves our most modern and best-equipped force, the Tiger-Hunt Marksmen, admirably suited to march south to stand between the capital and the Falling Star Giants of Hopeh. May this insignificant one suggest that the Dragon Throne issue orders to the Tiger-Hunt Marksmen and to General Tung at once?"

The Empress, careful to keep her face impassive, watches Prince Tuan as Jung Lu makes his recommendations. The ten thousand Tiger-Hunt Marksmen and General Tung's Muslim cavalry are Prince Tuan's personal armies. All his political power derives from his military strength. To risk his forces in battle is to endanger his own standing.

"What of the Throne?" Tuan asks. "If the Tiger-Hunt Marksmen march south, who will guard His Majesty? The Imperial Guard are only a few hundred men—surely their numbers are inadequate."

"The Throne may best be guarded by defeating the Falling Star Gi-

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ants," Jung Lu says.

"I must insist that half the Tiger-Hunt Marksmen be left in the capital to guard the person of the Son of Heaven," Tuan says.

The Empress and Emperor look at one another. Best to act now, the Empress thinks, before Prince Tuan regains his confidence. Half the Tiger-Hunt Marksmen are better than none.

Kuang Hsu turns back to the princes. "We leave it to you," he says.

In the still night the tramp of boots echoes from the high walls of the Forbidden City. Columns of Tiger-Hunt Marksmen, under the command of Tuan's brother Duke Lan, are marching off to meet the enemy.

In the Hour of the Dog, after nightfall, one of the Empress's blue-gowned maidens escorts Prince Jung Lu into her presence. He had avoided the Tiger-Hunt Marksmen by using the tunnels beneath the Forbidden City—they were designed to help servants move unobtrusively about their duties, but over the years they have been used for less licit purposes.

"We are pleased to express our gratitude," the Empress says, and takes from around her neck a necklace in which each pearl has been carved into the likeness of a stork. She places the necklace into the delighted hands of her maid.

Sad, she thinks, that it is necessary to bribe her own servants to encourage them to do what they should do unquestioningly, which is to obey and keep silent.

The darkness of the Empress's pavilion is broken only by starlight reflected from the yellow hangings. The odor of Nine-Buddha incense floats in the air.

"My friend," she tells Jung Lu, and reaches to touch his sleeve. "You must survive this upcoming battle. You and your army must live to rescue the Emperor from the Iron Hats."

"My life is in the hands of Fate," Jung Lu murmurs. "I must fight alongside my army."

"I *order* you to survive!" the Empress demands. "His Majesty cannot spare you."

There is a moment of silence, and then the old man sighs.

"This unworthy one will obey Her Majesty," he says.

Irrational though it may be, the Empress begins to glimpse a tiny, feeble ray of hope.

Hot western winds buffet the city, and the sky turns yellow with loess, dust blown hundreds of *li*. It falls in the courtyards of the Forbidden City, on the shoulders of the black-clad eunuchs as they scurry madly through the courtyards with arms full of valuables or documents. Hundreds of carts jam the byways. The Imperial Guard, in full

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armor, stand in disciplined lines about the litters of the royal family. Prince Tuan stands in the yard, waving the Shangfang Sword and shouting orders. Nobody obeys him, least of all his own son, Pu Chun, the imperial heir who crouches in terror beneath a cart.

The court is fleeing the city. Yesterday, the Falling Star Giants finally made their advance on Peking. At first the news was all bad, horsemen riding into the city with stories of entire regiments being incinerated by the Fire of the Meteor.

After that it was worse, because there was no news at all.

In the early hours of the morning an order arrived from Jung Lu to evacuate the court to the Summer Palace north of the city. Since then, all has been madness.

It is the Hour of the Hare, early in the morning. The Empress's blue-clad maidservants huddle in knots, weeping. The Empress, however, is made of sterner stuff. She has been through this once before. She picks up one of her little lion dogs and thrusts it into the arms of one of her maids.

"Save my dogs!" she orders. She can't stand the idea of losing them again.

"Falling Star Giants seen from the city walls!" someone cries. There is no telling whether or not the report is true. Serving women dash heedlessly about the court, their gowns whipped by the strong west wind.

"Flee at once!" Prince Tuan shrieks. "The capital is lost!" He runs for his horse and gallops away. His son, screaming in terror, follows on foot, waving his arms.

The Emperor appears, a plain traveling cloak thrown over his shoulders. "Mother," he says, "it is time to go."

The Empress carries two of her favorite dogs to the litter. Her eunuchs hoist her to their shoulders, and the column begins to march for the Chienmen Gate. The western wind rattles the banners of the guard, but over the sound of the wind the Empress can hear a strange wailing sound, like a demon calling out to its mate. And then a wail from another direction as the mate answers.

"Faster!" someone calls, and the litter begins to jounce. The guardsmen's armor rattles as they begin to jog. The Empress braces herself against the sides of the litter.

"Black smoke!" Another cry. "The Tail of the Meteor!"

Women scream as the escort breaks into a run. The Empress's lion dogs whimper in fear. She clutches the curtains and peers anxiously past them. The black smoke is plain to see, a tall column billowing out over the walls. As she watches, another rocket falls, trailing black.

But the strong west wind catches the tops of the dark, billowing column, and tears the smoke away, bearing it to the east.

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As the column flees to safety, loess covers the city in a soft blanket of imperial yellow.

Much of the disorganized column, including most of the wagon train with its documents and treasure, is caught in the black smoke and never escapes the capital. Half the Tiger-Hunt Marksmen are dead or missing.

The terror and confusion make the Empress Dowager breathless, but it is the many missing lion dogs that make her weep.

The column pauses north of the city at the Summer Palace only for a few hours, to beat some order into the chaos, then sets out into the teeth of the gale to Jehol on the Great Wall. In the distance the strange wailings of the Falling Star Giants are sometimes heard, but streamers of yellow dust conceal them.

By this time Prince Tuan has found his courage, his son, and his troops, the few thousand Tiger-Hunt Marksmen to have survived the fall of the capital. He calls a family conference in a requisitioned mansion, and Tuan issues edicts under the imperial seal calling for the extermination of all foreigners and Chinese Christians.

"Who will obey you?" the Emperor shouts at him. His hopelessness has made him fearless, has caused his stammer to disappear. "You have lost all China!"

"Heaven will not permit us to fail," Tuan says.

"I command you to kill yourself!" cries the Emperor.

Tuan turns to the Emperor and laughs aloud. "Once again His Majesty makes a witticism!"

But as news trickles in over the next few days, Tuan's belligerence turns sullen. A few survivors from a Peking suburb tell of the city's being inundated by black smoke after a second attack. Tuan's ally Prince Chuang is believed dead in the city, and old Kang I was found stone dead in his cart in Jehol, apparently having died unnoticed in the evacuation. Tuan's great ally General Tung has been killed along with his entire army. And his brother Duke Lan, after losing his entire division of Tiger-Hunt Marksmen to the Fire of the Meteor, committed suicide by drinking poison. There is no word from any of the great cities where meteors were known to have landed. No messages have come from Jung Lu, and he is believed dead.

"West!" Prince Tuan orders. His son Pu Chun stands by his side. "We will go west!"

"Kill yourself!" cries the Emperor. Pu Chun laughs.

"Somebody just farted," he sneers.

It is the Hour of the Horse, and the hot noon sun shortens tempers. The Empress Dowager holds her favorite lion dog for comfort. The dog whimpers, sensing the tension in the room.

"We will move tomorrow," Tuan says, and casts a cold look over his shoulder as he marches away from the imperial presence.

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Kuang Hsu slumps defeated in his chair. The old lady rises, the lion dog still in her arms, and slowly walks to her nephew's side. Tears spill from her eyes onto his brocade sleeve.

"Please forgive me," she says.

"Don't cry, mother," he says. "It isn't your fault that Foreign Devils have learned to ride meteors."

"I don't mean that," the Empress says. "I mean two years ago, during the Hundred Days Reform."

"Ahh," the Emperor sighs. He turns away. "Let us not speak of it."

"They frightened me, Prince Tuan and the others. They said your reforms were destroying the country. They said the Japanese were using you. They said the dwarf-bandits were plotting to kill us all. They said if I didn't come out of retirement, we would be destroyed."

"The Japanese modernized their country." Kuang Hsu speaks unwillingly. His eyes rise to gaze into the past, at his own dead hopes. "I asked for advice from Ito, who had written their constitution. That was all. There was no danger to anyone."

"The Japanese had just killed the Korean Empress! I was afraid they would kill me next!" The old woman clutches at the Emperor's hand. "I was old and afraid!" she says. "I betrayed you. Please forgive me for everything."

He turns to her and raises a hand to her cheek. His own eyes glitter with tears. "I understand, mother," he says. "Please don't cry."

"What can we do?"

He sighs again and turns away. "Ito told me that I could accomplish nothing as long as I was in the Forbidden City. That I could never truly be an Emperor with the eunuchs and the princes and the court in the way. Well—now the Forbidden City is no more. The eunuchs' power is gone, and there is no court. There are only a few of the princes left, and only one of those is important."

He wipes tears from his eyes with his sleeve, and the Empress sees cold determination cross his face. "I will wait," he says. "But when the opportunity comes, I will act. I *must* act."

The royal column continues its flight. There seems no purpose in its peregrinations, and the Empress of the West cannot tell if they are running away from something, or toward something else. Possibly they are doing both at once.

Apparently the Falling Star Giants have better things to do than pursue. Exhausted and with no where else to go, the royal family ends up in the governor's mansion in the provincial capital of Taiyuan. The courtyard is spattered with blood because the governor, Yu Hsien, had dozens of Christian missionaries killed here, along with their wives and children. Their eyeless foreign heads now decorate the city walls.

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One afternoon the Empress looks out the window, and sees Pu Chun practicing martial arts in the court. In his hands is a bloodstained beheading sword given him by Governor Yu.

She never looks out the window again.

All messages from the east are of death and unimaginable suffering. Cities destroyed, armies wiped out, entire populations fleeing before the attackers in routs as directionless as that of the court.

There is no news whatever from the rest of the world. Apparently all the Foreign Devils have been afflicted by Foreign Devils of their own.

And then, in the Hour of the Rooster, word comes that Prince Jung Lu has arrived and requests an audience, and the Empress feels her heart leap. She had never permitted herself to hope, not once she heard of the total destruction of Peking.

At once she convenes a family council.

The horrors of war have clearly affected Jung Lu. He walks into the imperial presence with a weary tread, and painfully gets on his knees to perform the required kowtows.

"This worthless old man begs to report to the Throne that the Falling Star Giants are all dead."

There is a long, stunned silence. The Emperor, flushed with sudden excitement, tries to speak but trips over his own tongue.

Joy floods Tzu Hsi's heart. "How did this occur?" she asks. "Did we defeat them in battle?"

"They were not defeated," Jung Lu says. "I do not know how they died. Perhaps it was a disease. I stayed only to confirm the reports personally, and then I rode here at once with all the soldiers I could raise. Five thousand Manchu bannermen await the Imperial command outside the city walls."

The Empress strokes one of her lion dogs while she makes a careful calculation. Jung Lu's five thousand bannermen considerably outnumber Prince Tuan's remaining Tiger-Hunt Marksmen, but Tuan's men have modern weapons and the bannermen do not. And these bannermen are not likely to be brave, as they probably survived the Falling Star Giants only by fleeing at the very rumor of their arrival.

She sees the relieved smile on Prince Tuan's face. "Heaven is just!" he says.

All turn at a noise from the Emperor. Kuang Hsu's hands clutch the arms of his chair, and his face twists with the effort to speak. Then he gasps and has an orgasm.

An hour ago he was a ghost-Emperor, nothing he did mattered, and he spoke freely. Now that he is the Son of Heaven again, his stammer and his nervous condition have returned.

A few moments later he speaks, his head turned away in embarrassment.

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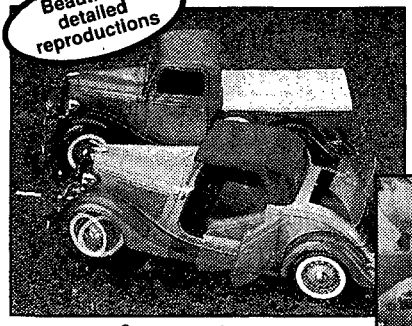

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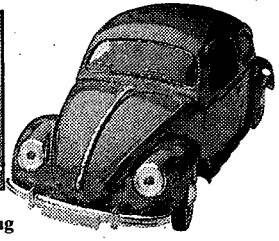

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"Tonight we will thank Heaven for its mercy and benevolence. Tomorrow, at the Hour of the Dragon, we will assemble again in celebration." He looks at Pu Chun, who stands near Prince Tuan. "I have observed the Heir practice wushu in the courtyard. I hope the Heir will favor us with a demonstration of his martial prowess."

Prince Tuan flushes with pleasure. He and his son fall to their knees and kowtow.

"We will obey the Imperial command with pleasure," Tuan says.

The Emperor turns his head away as he dismisses the company. At first the Empress thinks it is because he is shamed by his public orgasm, but then she sees the tight, merciless smile of triumph on the Emperor's lips, and a cold finger touches the back of her neck.

In the next hours the Empress of the West tries to smuggle a message to Jung Lu in hopes of seeing him privately, but the situation is so confusing that the messenger cannot find him. She decides to wait for a better time.

With the morning the Hour of the Dragon arrives, and the family council convenes. The remaining Iron Hats cluster together in pride and triumph. It is clearly their hour—the Falling Star Giants have abdicated, as it were, and left the nation to the mercies of the Iron Hats. As if in recognition of this fact, the Emperor awards Prince Tuan the office of Grand Councillor in place of the late Kang I.

Then Pu Chun is brought forward to perform wushu, and the Emperor calls the Imperial Guard into the room to watch. The imperial heir leaps about the room, shouting and waving the blood-encrusted sword given him by Governor Yu as he decapitates one imaginary Foreign Devil after another. The Empress has seen much better martial art in her time, but at the end of the performance, all are loud in their praise of the young heir, and the Emperor descends from his chair to congratulate him.

Fighting his tongue—the Emperor seems unusually tense today—he turns to the heir and says, "I wonder if the Heir has learned a sword technique called The Dragon in Flight from Low to High?"

Pu Chun is reluctant to admit that he is not a complete master of the sword, but with a bit of paternal prodding he admits that this technique seems to have escaped him.

Kuang Hsu's stammer is so bad he can barely get the words out. "Will the Heir permit me to teach?"

"Your Majesty honors us beyond all description," Prince Tuan says. Despite his lifelong ill health, the Emperor like every Manchu prince practiced wushu since he was a boy, and always received praise from his instructors.

The Emperor turns to Prince Tuan, his face red with the struggle to speak. "May . . . I . . . have the honor . . . to use . . . the Shangfang Sword?"

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"The Son of Heaven does his unworthy servant too much honor!" Prince Tuan eagerly strips the long blade from its sheath and presents it on his knees to the Emperor.

The Emperor strikes a martial pose, sword cocked, and Pu Chun imitates him. Watching from her chair, the Empress feels her heart stop. Terror fills her. She knows what is about to happen.

The movement is too swift to follow, but the Shangfang Sword whistles as it hurtles through air, and its blade is sharp and true. Suddenly Prince Tuan's head rolls across the floor. Blood fountains from the headless trunk.

Fury blazes from Kuang Hsu's eyes, and his body, unlike his tongue, has no stammer. His second strike crushes the skull of Tuan's ally, Governor Yu. His third kills the president of the Board of Punishments. And his fourth—the Empress cries out to stop, but is too late—the fourth blow strikes the neck of the boy heir, Pu Chun, who is so stunned by the unexpected death of his father that he doesn't think to protect himself from the blade that kills him.

"Protect the Emperor!" Jung Lu cries to his guardsmen. "Kill the traitors!"

Those Iron Hats still breathing are finished off by the Imperial Guard. And then the Guard rounds up the Iron Hats' subordinate officers, and within minutes their heads are struck off.

The Emperor dictates an order to open the city gates, and the order is signed with the Imperial Seal. Jung Lu's loyal bannermen pour into the city and surround the throne with a wall of guns, swords, and spears.

Only then does the Emperor notice the old woman, still frozen in fear, who sits on her throne clutching her whimpering lion dogs.

Kuang Hsu approaches, and the Empress shrinks from the blood that soaks his dragon-embroidered robes.

"I am sorry, mother, that you had to watch this," he says.

The Empress manages to find words within the cloud of terror that fills her mind.

"It was necessary," she says.

"The Foreign Devils have been destroyed," the Emperor says, "and so have the Falling Star Giants. The Righteous Harmony Fists are no more, and neither are the Iron Hats. Now there is much suffering and loss of life, but China has survived such catastrophes before."

The Empress looks at the blood-spattered dragons on the Emperor's robes. "The Dragon has flown from Low to High," she says.

"Yes." The Emperor looks at the Shangfang Sword, still in his hand. "The Falling Star Giants have landed all over the world," he says. "For many years the Foreign Devils will be busy with their own affairs. While they are thus occupied we will take control of our own ports, our own laws, the railroads, industries, and telegraphs. By the time they are

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ready to deal with us again, the Middle Kingdom will be strong and united, and on its way to being as modern as any nation in the world."

Kuang Hsu looks up at the Empress of the West.

"Will you help me, mother?" he asks. "There will be need of reform—not just for a Hundred Days, but for all time. And I promise you—" His eyes harden, and for a moment she sees a dragon there, the animal that according to legend lives in every Emperor, and which has slumbered in Kuang Hsu till now. "I promise you that you will be safe. No one will be in a position to harm you."

"I am old," the Empress says, "but I will help however I can." She strokes the head of her lion dog. Her heart overflows. Tears of relief sting her eyes. "May the Hour of the Dragon last ten thousand years," she says.

"*Ten thousand years!*" the guards chorus, and to the cheers the Emperor walks across the blood-stained floor to the throne that awaits him. ●

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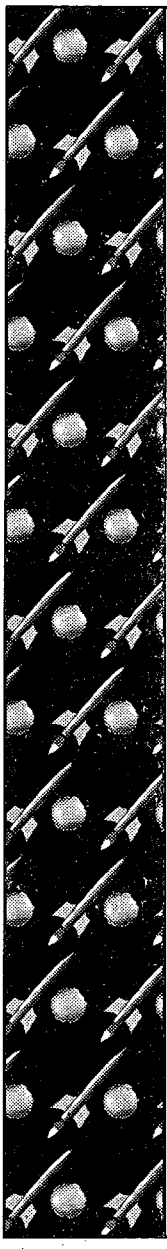


CURSE OF THE SF WRITER'S WIFE

Sandbags. Anchors. Lead weights.
Sacks of grain. She's tried every
kind of ballast she can think of.

Hemp. Leather. Silk. Chain link
Steel cable. Every kind of leash
and collar she can possibly fashion.

Yet every time she turns her back
he takes flight with his imagination
once again and is off to the moons

of Jupiter or the red sands of Mars.
The uncut lawn continues to grow.
The garage continues to clutter.

Oblivious to such domestic concerns
he resides within his own creations.
Where's Daddy? the children screech.

He's working, she always tells them,
never really believing it herself.
If only it paid the bills more often

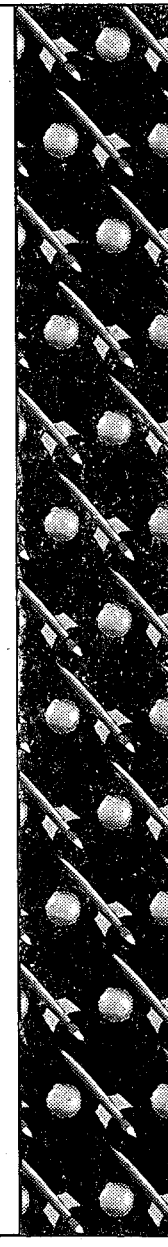
she might buy it as a "kind" of work.
But she knows play when she sees it,
selfish play of the most trivial sort.

In her darkest moments she prays
that the far distant future will
accelerate on a lightning course

and rush to meet them overnight,
that somehow in the flip of a switch
science fiction will be science fact,

that all the possible fancies he might
invent will already have transpired.
Maybe then he'd find an honest trade.

—Bruce Boston



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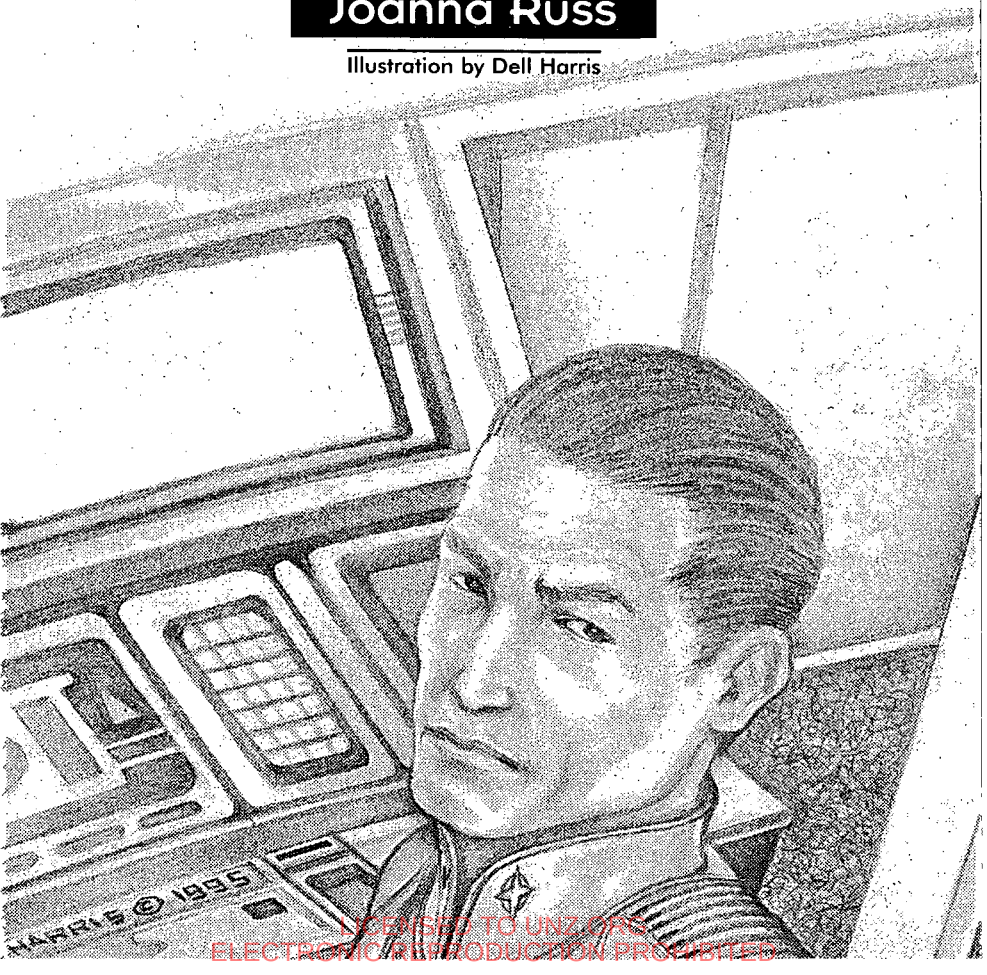
This brilliant science fiction writer won the Hugo award for her novella, "Souls" (an excerpt from her novel, *Extra(Ordinary) People*) in 1983 and the 1972 Nebula award for her seminal short story, "When It Changed." The latter tale also appeared in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (Norton, 1985). The author's most recent works include a collection of essays, *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts* (The Crossing Press, 1985), and a collection of short stories, *The Other Side of the Moon* (St. Martin's, 1988). Her witty first tale for *Asimov's* takes a look at a rather charming . . .

INVASION

Joanna Russ

Illustration by Dell Harris



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They were terrible.

The Doctor found one under the operating table in the hospital (impossible to tell its sex) that regarded her suspiciously and then, as she reached for it, vanished with a *pop!* of inrushing air.

The Second-in-command discovered three of them between the sheets as he started to make the bed in the quarters he shared with the Captain. The creatures rolled away from him, grinning, and vanished.

An especially small one—who'd been in the swimming pool, it seemed, and who was dripping wet, its yellow costume all soggy—materialized against the hand-woven tapestry on the cabin's wall, slid down, and left a trail of water-blurred color behind it. It shrieked excruciatingly and vanished.

The Navigator walked into her study area and found two of them sitting on top of her antique wooden bookcase. Normally a peaceful woman, even a bit shy, she threw herself at the intruders, shouting "No!" only to receive a painful barrage of books in the face, most of which then rolled under the bed as she grabbed for them, acquiring disc-destroying grit in the process. Several hit her on the forehead, hard. When she was able to scramble out from under the bed, her hands full of them, the intruders were gone.

One perched weightlessly on the Communicator's head as he was combing his hair. Two others landed heavily in his lap. One said, "Comb *my* hair"; another, "Give us a kiss." The one sitting on his head dropped into his lap, crowding the other two (who kicked and rocked for a few seconds, trying to get the lap back for themselves alone) and asked, in an unexpectedly deep, hoarse voice, "Do you like worms?"

The Communicator thought for a moment. Then he said, "Worms are fine in the soil of Botany Level Two, but nowhere else."

Little number three looked in its overall pocket, sighed, its whole face expressing woe, and vanished. Little number one-in-the-lap cried, "Comb my hair!" so he did, using the mother-of-pearl-backed hair-pick that had been in his family for generations. Two rocked back and forth on his lap, humming—they were actually fairly heavy littles, he decided—and number one subsided into dreaminess while having its wild, fuzzy, orange hair combed. The combing accomplished, the Communicator thought for a minute or so while little number two sucked its thumb. Then he said, carefully, "I'm going to tell you a wonderful story. Once there were three little people and they were just like you—"

The Engineer found that one of the creatures (a really young one) had crawled inside a ventilation duct and was gnawing at the lining with a look of fascination on its pudgy features. An older one was reaching for the fusion reactor controls. The Engineer was not one to act hastily or unthinkingly, even when something threatened her engines, and she also had the great advantage of having been brought up on a male-dominated

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planet as the eldest of nine. Stealthily she reached for the shelf near the radiation-proof door, on which she kept items confiscated from tourists or staff, mostly food and some gadgets her assistants had carried into the area, or rather had planned to carry, for she was down on anything that might interfere with efficient single-mindedness. (She over-compensated for her bringing-up.) The little one (she thought) should like a jingling bunch of keys, while for the other she took off the shelf a torus toy, made of rubber and filled with nothing stranger than plain water . . . that crawled out of your hand no matter how you held it. She mimed dramatic dismay. The small little crawled with amazing speed out of the duct, its plump rear switching from side to side. It pounced on the fallen torus, only to have the older little pounce on it, in turn, and pull the toy out of the baby's grasp. The younger proceeded to mourn its loss with loud screams of anguish. The Engineer picked it up, like the expert she was, and jiggled the little. Then she jiggled both the little and the keys against her shoulder. It grabbed for the keys and inspected them. It made them jingle. The bigger one looked calculatingly at her as if to say, *You want this back, don't you?* and she shook her head. Then, wondering if the creature could understand any human speech or behavior, she spread both hands out, palms front, meaning *It's yours if you wish.* The little went to its companion, picked it up (staggering under the other little's weight) and made its way to the corridor. The Engineer, enormously relieved, punched the complicated signal that locked the Engine Room. Now the doors would open only to her voice command or that of her primary assistant.

There was a tap on her knee.

Looking down, she saw number two, the bigger one, politely handing her back the torus toy. She took it.

The little vanished.

Now I will tell of the time the yoomin beans catched us, it was sad but o so fine. Kick Mwres, bash Mwres, no more soundings. Quiet, Mwres. *I* am to tell. It was big ship, big shape looming and glooming in the starlite when—no, not G'lydd, *I me*—saw and took all in. Funny on outside, spidery things and bumps and "numbers," G'lydd say. Sh, Mwres. So we all swarm in, it being allalonetime now and You Know Who not here, he/she in sun, not knowing what we doing baddie stuff. *Oof!* into metal wall, *ping!* inside metal, streaming on to round plastipak cover, can see within.

Creatures! A whole round of creatures is ambulating, zizzing, flesh voice-boxes (such they have, to be sure) et cetera. *Yick!* says Ulf. *Beans,* say I. So we go all ways into different places, full of interest, to see beans do such, so we become beanshape, in yellow, to do beansuches acts, as: Crawling, yelling, jumping, shrieking, et cetera. We fell on hair and lap, got told story like real little crittur, went in and out of water, sat on big,

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woodeny thing, pulled a toy from littler bean, we yelled, we gave it back, we rolled between "sheets" on "bed," and so on.

Then a tall, goldy-topped bean SAT on us. Shriek! Shriek! Help! Haw, goes Gr, was sat upon. The beans all shake up, another do a bean thing called "laff," others too but hide tee-hee under hands.

Short, round-shape bean with front bumps say, "Why is my ship infested with babies and small children in yellow overalls?" and other person reply, "Mam, we receive distress call from planet Ulp, is terrible disease ramping among adults, must be send up kiddies to be safe."

(This is not lie *exactly*. Maybe not so true, either, says G'lydd. Yes it is, I say indignants. Horrible rigidity disease all over down below, can be ONLY ONE THING AT TIME, can think of worse?)

Tall story-teller bean say, "Mam, I attempted to verify distress call with"—here Gr interrupt, *tweedled* and *twaddled* and *twuddled,* but tall bean really say with all cryptograms and codes and distortions and whatnot but cannot find no signal except planet Ulp's (sent, as WE know, by YOU KNOW WHO) so Ulpians send up all these babies and small children to ship to be safe.

Starey-eyed Second-person mutter to self, Yes, but will *we* be safe from *them?* Mwres snicker. Says, *I* slummed down pretty wall hanger, ho ho, will never be same.

Nasty! says G'lydd.

Funny skinny little person with front bumps say Oh Mam, oh, mam, they is only innocent little beans, kiddies and such, let us be kind to them, feed them broth and cookings, give them nice place to sleep, &c. We all haw haw at bumpy person; we want eat cherry pie, whipt cream, pickled herrings, wiener buns, strawberry shore cake and such. Make come out of walls. Gr know how.

Doctor say Mam, is against humanities not to give refuge to poor little mites. Gafroy bite her, ugh, taste awful from toes not washed for week, report Gafroy. Doctor pull foot back. Except that one, she say, glaring. We loff, go: we are inocent, inocent.

Uh-oh. Sour-faced Second-person open mouth, say: Captain, I have suspections these not kiddies—but here Gr and Grf and I ram into its stummick, causing loss of breath to speak, & Ff bounce up and down on midsection, causing fuss and silence. Shame! cry Doctor-person, to say such of poor innocents which their peoples is dying down there in droves. Tsk tsk say all. So we run all of us to splashing pool and splash in, making big fun, then zoom out to food room and gorge selves on cherry pie with whip cream, leaving some on floor, alas. Then to beds which we roll in "sheets" and leave feetmarks on "blankets." Captain say Can any of you really envision these poor little children six to a bed in *your* bed? and all persons grab each other and say, no no no, please help, anywhere else, will get in way something terrible. We know what they thinking and Ff

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want to tell but I won't let. Not proper. Maybe somebody will read us storybooks? They have all this things like stuff was throwed at us. So we nice to all, stick out little bellies, wiggle eyelashes, &c. say, Oh read us a story, plees, plees, O Lady who Steer. Is such lovely thinkings. So she pleesed and do so, very lovely, very exciting, Gr and Ff kiss from it & dance. Is all in rhyme and alliteration, can not understand but beauty. Then somebody else do and somebody elses and elses. This take seven hours forty-five minutes ten seconds three milliseconds. We not tired. Wow. Then off to food room for strawberry pie and chocolate bars wow wow even tastier. Then time to play poker at bottom of swimming pool, which upset guard bean until G'lydd explain we O.K. but still upset so we sleep in botanical place instead, Ff snacking off plants with Mwres. Leave them alone, sir. Comb hair. Clean teeth on plant stalk. All say together, oh You Know Who, guard our sleep but stay away, plees. Then we all loving and goody and glow with friendlies. Then we sleep.

Next day: Doctor-bean very active in laboratory trying find cure for rigidity disease. Muttering to self about blood samples and such we bring up from Ulp surface: Why, these are all ideally normal! Is no disease here. She putter & putter & tsk. G'lydd want to tell her but Ff and I sit on she: No! Mustn't! until give up. G'lydd shake haughty and toss head and vanish away. Lie in sun room pretend bean, with cache-sexe and dark glasses but in switched places. Haw! Then Doctor say Aha! I have found fraction of lipid protein is very strange, without which these people would be mere heaps of protoplasmic gunk. But this cannot be a cure for disease unless disease is normalcy itself. Hurrah! I have found it. Ulpians catch normal humancy from us on ship; that is disease. She then grab and inoculate laboratory squirrel, which was hiding under papers on desk to get away from doctors. Behold! It turn into a mess of Jell-O. Then she inoculate own knee, which also turn all squudgy and nasty. Behold! she say. The antidote to the disease of Form!

Meanwhile nice story-teller person finally contact planet Ulp and up is coming—

No, no! yell Mwres, I didn't it was THEY who did it, I didn't mess up tapestried. I didn't throw books at steer-lady. I didn't gnaw tube, it was THEM.

Ff and L1 and Gafroy say: Look WHO is coming.

It is You Know Who.

Uh oh.

With one loud Word YKW make us fall into line and behave—anybody acts naughty now gets incarnated as cactus for fifty years—and we all sob & cry & promise to be good, turning back into our treu shape, which is two-foot-high pyramids of green Jell-O. YKW is a six-foot-high pyramid of green Jell-O. I flash a bit into my yellow-overalls yoomin form to say good-

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bye.

YKW trounce me. That is telepathic and very awful, tho' I won't say how. If you are pyramid of green Jell-O, it *hurts* (to make ripples). So I regress right back into being a nauseous Thing.

Story man say softly in mind: You are very beautiful just as you are, little Things. Life is beautiful. Nothing is so graceful and lovely as a heap of green Jell-O.

So we leave happy. Crying goodbye, goodbye, I sorry I hurt your arti-factual and put water on it. I was bad. I ate and messed up food room and did other awfuls. But I am only a lit-ul child.

MARCH! says You Know Who.

So we march.

Down on the surface everybody is now cured of looking like Yoomin Beans, and is back to normal, viz. green gunk. Life is again horrible. Up in ship only Ff is still there, try to hide out in botanical bay, imitating frond. Is not successful, is almost devoured by botany cat, must come down to surface in disgrace, to look forever like Graminidae. Sometimes we look up into sky, remembering beautiful ship and food and cry, O ship-thing, ship-thing, wherefore art thou up so high/like a carpet in the sky? And we flow about, savagely chanting:

Rigidity, rigidity,

Wherefore art thou so fond of we?

Which is a sort of spring thing, a festival cry with which we assault the boring semi-liquidity of our fate.

Meanwhile:

Mam say to steer-person: Did you authorize the entry of these . . . ah . . . youngsters without checking out Ulp and said species computer-wise?

All say No no, nobody let them in. Do not do bad things to us, plees. Was not our fault.

Enough. We shall torment you no more. Goodbye, goodbye.

The day shift slept, the Engineer dreaming that she was at home with too few rights and far too many little brothers and sisters. The Doctor woke every few minutes with a start, having dreamed repeatedly of an operating room overrun with Ulpian youngsters, until she gave up, rose, put on her robe, and went to enter results into the hospital computer, from where she could keep an oblique watch on the hall and the next room. The Navigator slept on her face, over a cache of her most precious discs. The Communicator alone slept soundly and did not dream. Both reading, both wearing glasses (the Captain for myopia, her First for a touch of astigmatism) the Captain and the First were in bed together, the latter in pajamas. After a while the Captain put down her book *(Military History of the Late T'ang)* and frowned. "Thinking about those children?" said the other.

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"They were *not children,*" she said decisively, and shuddered.

"Well, yes," he said, "they were aliens, true but even as pyramids of green Jell-O, they were . . . well, baby pyramids."

"Hm!" said she. There was a moment's silence. He went back to his own book, an annotated *Poems of Emily Dickinson.* Then she said slowly:

"Love, do you think . . . did it ever occur to you that all children are aliens?"

He said, "Do you mean the bouncing on adults and the cherry pie between their toes? Oh yes. No, not really. Anyway I rather liked them. The small pyramids, I mean."

"I suppose," she said, a bit sharply, "that it's perfectly normal for human male philoprogenitiveness to be roused by contact with small pyramids of green goo. Nonetheless—"

"No, not by them. By you."

"By me?"

"Absolutely." He added, "Do you want to back out?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No. We'll do it. It'll be human, after all. Not like them."

Indeedy yes. Will be little yoomin bean. Will be playmate. Will be *lonely.* You Know Who go away again soon.

We come back. ●

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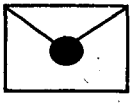

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CURSE OF THE BODY-THIEF'S WIFE

When he inhabits another man's soul
and rides another man's life
he becomes an amalgam
of self and other,
a hodgepodge of desires and needs.

When he inhabits a woman's soul
and commandeers another life
he becomes an amalgam
of self and other,
a hodgepodge of warring sexes.

When he straggles home to her,
shedding skins and hatching schemes,
forever on the mend,
hoary long before his time,
he turns uncaring eyes
on a world he's left behind.
He's lived far too many lives
for a man of petty dreams.

When she impales him
on the ivory warmth of her embrace,
bodies stretched upon the bed
in double crucifixion,
her beauty and her grace
are like a stain upon his scowl,
her innocence in need of devastation.

—Bruce Boston

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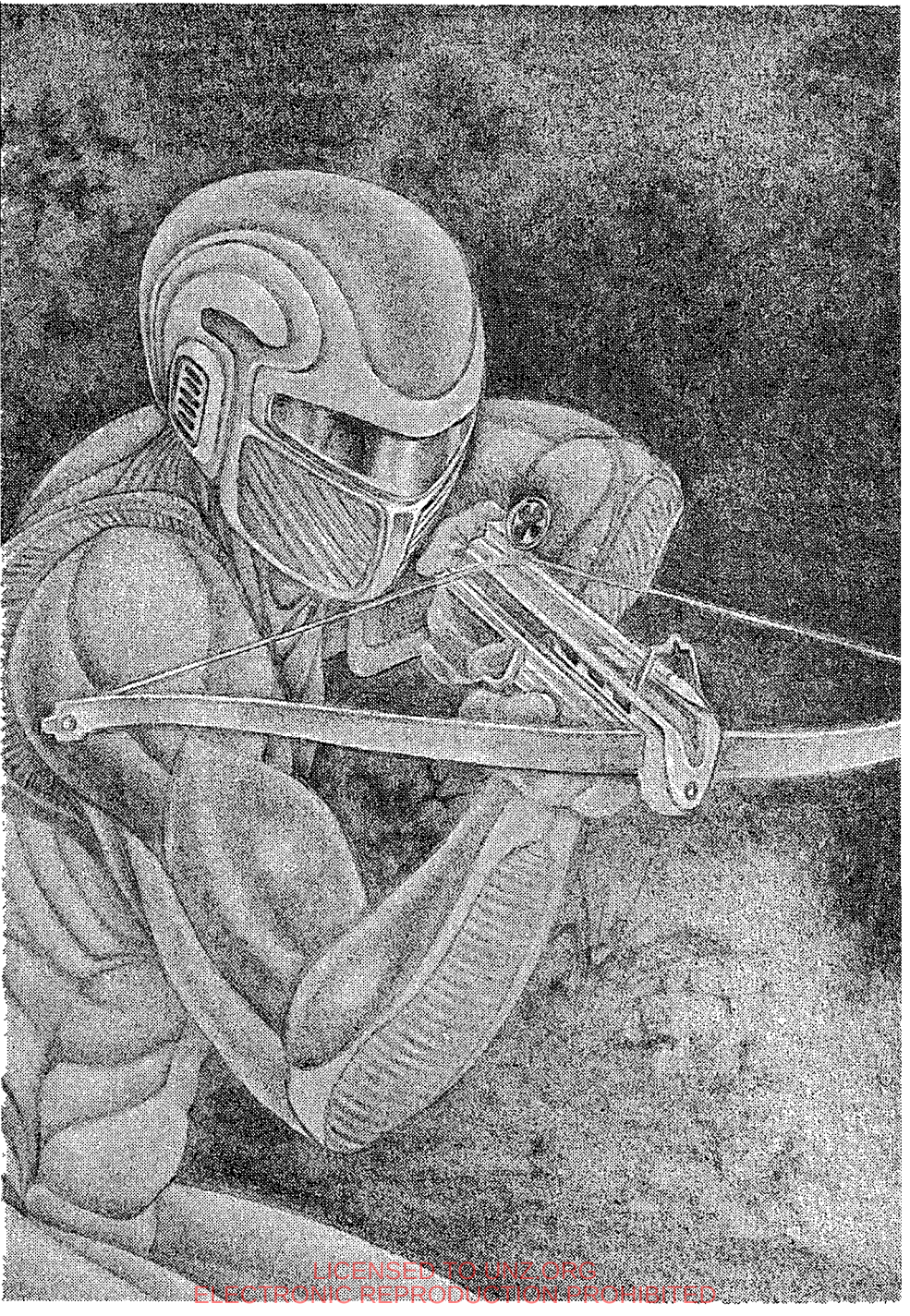

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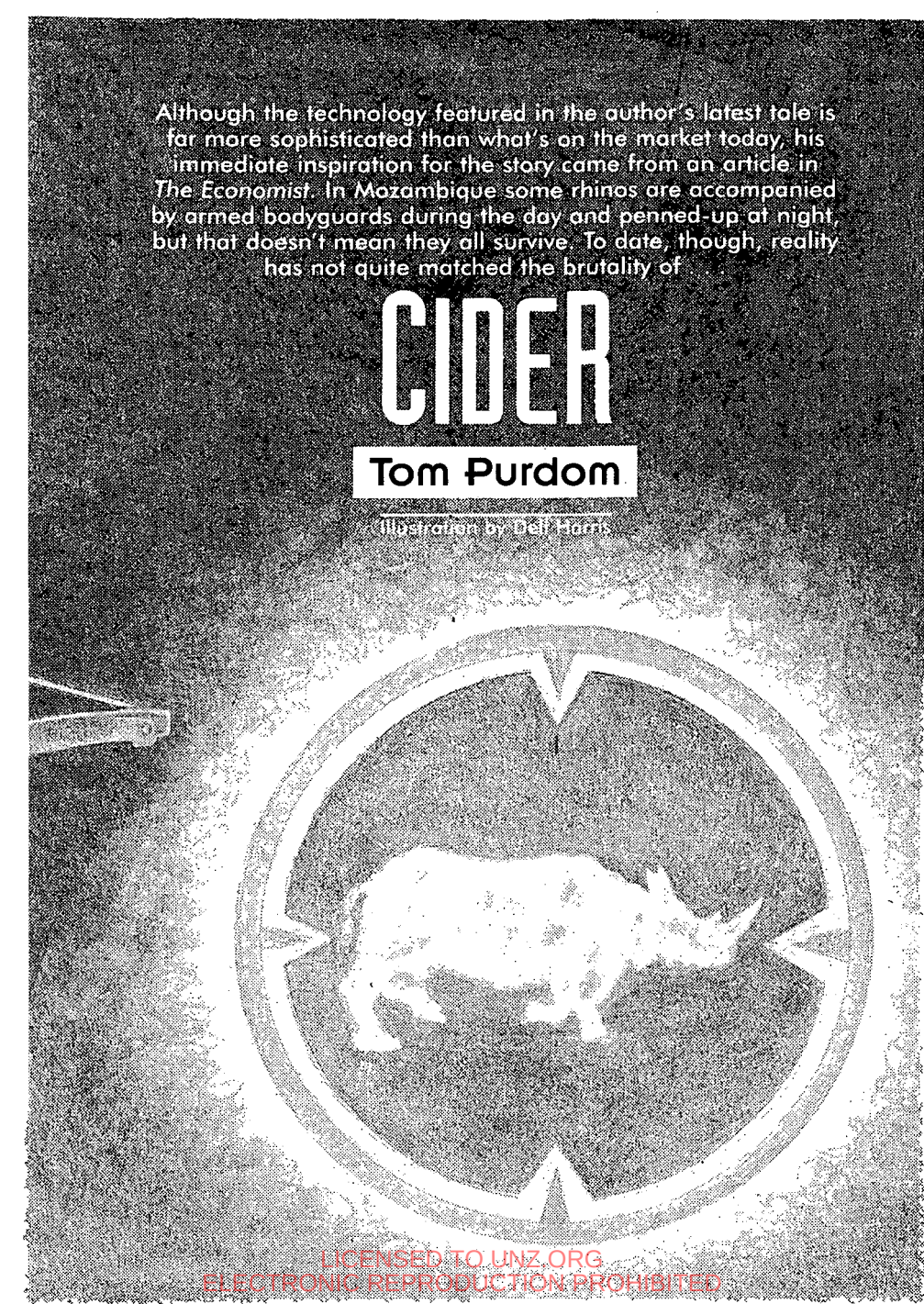
Although the technology featured in the author's latest tale is far more sophisticated than what's on the market today, his immediate inspiration for the story came from an article in *The Economist*. In Mozambique some rhinos are accompanied by armed bodyguards during the day and penned-up at night, but that doesn't mean they all survive. To date, though, reality has not quite matched the brutality of

CIDER

Tom Purdom

Illustration by Bell Harris



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The last barrier in the boundary defenses was a dry moat that had been planted with alarm mines. The mines had been arranged in a pattern designed by a random-placement program and the spacing got tighter as you crossed the moat. The final cluster in Shaldin's path was a group of three mines arranged in a tight triangle. The mines were jammed so close together Shaldin had to twist himself into an L to squeeze past them.

The reconnaissance team had located every mine in the moat. They had crammed every piece of detection equipment they could afford into a helicopter and managed to fly a search pattern within three kilometers of the boundary defenses. Now the computer was projecting a map of the mine field on Shaldin's face plate. The positions of the three mines he was trying to avoid were imaged as disks, with a glowing, fuzzy border that defined the area of probability. His legs and arms tingled whenever the sensors in his combat suit noticed they had strayed within six centimeters of one of the fuzzy areas.

It had taken Shaldin forty minutes to crawl across the moat. Before that he had spent two hours working his way through two other obstacles—a high, fully equipped security fence, and the surveillance zones that had been established on both sides of the fence. The worst part had probably been the crawl through the surveillance zones. The ground had been stripped of every piece of vegetation taller than a neatly trimmed blade of grass and the zones were guarded by long range sensors directed from the main guard station. Shaldin's suit was supposed to send back false signals when a probing beam made contact, but you never knew when a momentary blip would arouse the suspicions of the screen watchers.

The tension relaxed a few percentage points when Shaldin eased himself out of the moat and started crouching through the terrain the boundary defenses were supposed to protect. The black rhinoceros was a browser, not a grass grazer like the white rhino. From now on he would be moving through brush and wooded areas. Bushes, trees, and rolling, uneven ground would provide him with cover that would help him confuse the long range sensors.

There were four other hunters on the team. Every three or four minutes—at random intervals—Shaldin's suit would receive a compressed, encrypted information blip that included an update on the last positions the other hunters had reported. The base camp for the hunt had been installed twenty kilometers behind him, on the other side of the biggest river in the area. The country on that side of the river had signed all the international agreements that were supposed to protect the more popular birds and beasts, but its Minister of Trade and Tourism believed a good host shouldn't ask too many questions when he was entertaining a free-

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spending guest.

The image on Shaldin's face plate shifted as he murmured commands. Sometimes the suit offered him a tactical map, with the locations of the targets and the other hunters. Most of the time it presented him with a simulated view of his immediate surroundings—a view that had been constructed from all the information sources the suit worked with. He couldn't have seen the real landscape even if he had raised his helmet. It was too dark. Instead, he saw a picture the suit composed from sound, starlight, infrared radiation, and the small-scale map of the sanctuary filed in its memory.

Five minutes after Shaldin left the moat, the suit picked up two baboons who were obviously patrol animals. He waited, huddled against a bush, while the infrared cameras mounted on their shoulders scanned the area around him. The suit had ordered him to drop to all fours, so he assumed it was emitting a bush pig heat signature. The suit could store and release heat in patterns that could convince a pattern recognition program it was looking at a baboon, an impala, or a bush pig.

Twenty kilometers behind him, the base camp was sweeping the sanctuary with its radar. A blip touched his helmet and the map highlighted his next objective—a male rhinoceros who was browsing about three hundred meters in front of him. The other four hunters were fanning out on his left. By now, if the map were correct, they were spread over a front that was almost two kilometers wide.

Wittgenmark would have called it a front, anyway. Wittgenmark liked military terminology. He had even tried to wear a military beret under his suit helmet. Right now Wittgenmark was about seven hundred meters on Shaldin's left, veering steadily westward as he advanced. The second blue dot on the map—that was Wittgenmark.

The male rhino was browsing in a group of bushes located on the rim of a dip. Shaldin paused at the bottom of the dip, about eighty meters from the animal's flank, and unlatched the case mounted on his left shoulder.

Wittgenmark had reacted as if he had been expelled from the regiment when he had learned they were going to use crossbows. Wittgenmark was the richest hunter in the safari (or operation, as he liked to call it) but he was also the youngest. Apparently he had been assuming he would slip through the night with a pneumatic gun that looked like a military rifle.

Shaldin checked his display and made sure the area around him was clear. The red dot from the laser sight rested on a spot just behind the rhino's shoulder. He squeezed the trigger with the steady pull of the trained marksman and the arrow arced across the hollow while he was still concentrating on the position of the dot.

He started hurrying toward the rhino as soon as he realized the arrow

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had been released. This was the most dangerous part of the hunt in some ways. Most pacifiers knocked the animal out. This one was supposed to keep a typical male docile for approximately seven minutes. If this particular animal wasn't quite as typical as you would like him to be . . .

The rhino was standing with its head slumped—a good sign, according to the drug technicians. Shaldin approached it from the side, just in front of the head, as the technicians had told him he should. The package he attached to its neck was a modified version of the device that controlled the guard baboons. Everything happened automatically once he pressed the package against the hide just behind the skull. Needles punctured the thick skin. Molecules began to grow toward the spinal cord.

In the lower right corner of Shaldin's face plate, a clock image ticked off the time. The rhino shifted its weight at the four minute mark and let out a long, bovine sigh. Animal odor drifted through the suit's filtering system.

Shaldin had never felt comfortable near large animals. He could tolerate the horses that pulled sightseeing carriages through the park near his apartment but he had always avoided the paths that attracted people who actually rode horses. Now, in the dark, halfway around the world from the shopping malls and apartment towers he visualized when he thought of home, he was standing next to two tons of living, unpredictable mass.

A red light glowed on the box on the rhino's neck. He ripped a palm-size chunk of plastic off his belt and snapped a wire into a connection on the side of the box. His thumb slid across the top of the plastic.

The rhino shuddered and swung its head. Its back swayed. It lurched forward and slowly turned right.

He rubbed the top center of the plastic controller and the rhino stepped forward. He moved his thumb left and it turned left. He pressed on the center and it stopped. The molecules had done their job. A new set of electrochemical circuits had established a limited control over the animal's motor nerves.

A black rhinoceros usually crashed through the brush. Environmentalists claimed it created trails other animals could follow. Sooner or later one of the screen watchers in the security headquarters might notice five male rhinos were behaving rather sedately. In the meantime, they would merely see the symbols that told them five males were engaging in their nightly browsing. There would be no indication a man was crouching beside each animal. The cameras on the baboons might pick up the intruders if the baboons came close enough but they usually scanned the terrain *around* the rhinos. The screen watchers were looking for stalkers, not controllers.

He was leading two tons of animal through the bush on a wire. As if he were walking a terrier through a park. He was MAN—the dominant

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species, the master of the Earth. Everything on Earth lived or died as MAN decided. The rhinos in the sanctuary were already totally dependent on human beings. They lived because humans chose to guard them. They would die because other humans chose to kill them.

There were one hundred and ninety-three rhinos in the sanctuary—the last free-living black rhinoceroses in the world.

There were rhinos in zoos. There were rhinos who lived on farms. In a few years there might even be rhinos on the Moon. But they were all domesticated. They were all evolving into pets. The rhinos he was stalking were the last black rhinos who bred and died at random, subject to nothing but the pressures of their environment. When this group died, the species would, for all practical purposes, be dead. It would exist only as a domesticated animal.

The safari didn't have to kill every rhino in the sanctuary. The hunt committee had run hundreds of population simulations when it had started thinking about this hunt and its screens had eventually presented it with the number its members had been looking for.

You must wipe out seventeen breeding females in one attack, the simulations had decreed. Do that, and the population will never recover. Sometime in the next twenty-five to fifty years—assuming the survivors receive the benefit of the best possible conditions—the last organism in the subject population will die.

Somebody else might kill the last free-living rhinoceros. Someone else might boast that he had fired the last shot or administered the last drop of poison. The man who had really cided the species would be Horace Shaldin.

"By tomorrow morning," Wittgenmark had said, "by tomorrow morning—if this goes off, of course—*if* this goes off—we're all going to be, every one of us, the top ciders in the world. There won't be a human being on Earth who won't know about this."

Wittgenmark had flashed one of his wry little smiles when he had inserted his little "if this goes off" disclaimer—letting you know he was saying that out of superstition but of course he knew it was a silly thing to do, even if he did it himself. His eyes had glowed. His voice had risen just the tiniest bit, just enough so anybody who had spent two days with him knew he was thinking about that speech from Shakespeare that he liked to recite. *And gentlemen in England now abed will count themselves accursed they were not here.* He always put on that little smile when he quoted that in the middle of a training exercise—to let you know he really did realize he shouldn't take *that* seriously, either.

But he was right, of course. He might be dumber than a rhino himself, but he was right. You could hide for the next thirty years just living off the people who would want to have you around so they could show you off

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to their friends. Wittgenmark had even been right when he had argued—with another one of those self-mocking smiles—that you would be a "high status member of the convict community" if you got caught.

And who would be the top cider of them all? The leader of the safari that did the job? The man who gave the kill order? Seigneur Rhinocide himself?

Shaldin's antenna rose above his helmet. The suit transmitted a blip and received another blip a few seconds later. The four hunters on his left had all taken control of their cover animals. They were all proceeding toward their first targets.

The search radar at base camp had no trouble locating females. Black rhino females produced a new infant every two or three years. When they weren't pregnant, most of them were accompanied by a calf that followed its mother as she broke a trail through the brush. The tactical program had already assigned each hunter his first four targets. Shaldin's suit had already worked out a course that would put him in contact with each target in the shortest possible time.

His communications equipment frequency-hopped several hundred times a second. The security system might pick up a blip now and then but it should be three hours—at minimum—before its analysis programs registered enough points to spot a pattern.

Shaldin knew the names of all the companies who sold equipment to the sanctuary. He knew how much money the sanctuary had spent on security equipment. He knew what its technical payroll was. And from that, Wittgenmark and the other "intelligence analysts" on the hunt committee had worked out a list of the security equipment the sanctuary had to be using. The money they had offered a certain employee in the government tax office had looked like a lot to a woman with five daughters.

Wind rustled the brush. Stars blazed in the black, moonless dome that arched over Shaldin's head. His suit analyzed the probings of the invisible electronic fingers that searched the night. Baboons crossed his path and forced him to engage in more crouched, alert halts. He was *feeling.*

There were other things that could make him feel, too. He felt when he took the right drugs. He felt when he had an orgasm. He had always thought he would feel some really great things if he killed one of his sex partners.

He had thought about that a lot, in fact—more than he should have. How would they look during that last few minutes—or that last hour, if you could drag it out that long—when they knew you were really going to do it?

You were running a real risk just thinking about things like that. People didn't like it when you killed other people. They didn't like it when

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you wiped out another species but they didn't seem to react in quite the same way. Some of them even thought it was a good idea.

The first target was browsing on the edge of a wooded area. The approach on the map led him through a gully that gave him some extra cover but the tactical program had picked a bad aiming point. The site had looked reasonable on the map, but the animal had moved as he closed in. His line of sight was blocked by the edge of a bush. He had to check out everything around him, quarter by quarter, before he moved away from the shelter of the male rhino and shuffled four steps to the left of the original position. The animal snorted and shook herself when the missile struck her side but she settled down within seconds.

The next target on the map was over three kilometers away. There was a long period—it must have lasted almost fifteen minutes—when the suit made him arc around the target in a wide circle, so he could approach from up wind and the target wouldn't be disturbed by the scent of his cover male.

It would have been better if he could have done this job alone, but a stalk like that proved he couldn't. Rhinos were basically solitary creatures. Females with young tended to keep three or four kilometers between them as they browsed.

He launched his second marking arrow from sixty meters, with his elbows resting on the male's back. When he transmitted his blip, the blip he got back told him three of the other hunters were already advancing on their third target. The super-achiever was Wittgenmark. He was working on his fourth.

Shaldin had known he was going to lag behind the others. Now he wondered if his slowness was becoming too noticeable. The others didn't know it, but his suit had been programmed with a lower threat level. His sensors picked up the same kind of information theirs did, but the suit halted him—or took evasive action—when it received indications their suits ignored.

The whole operation depended on stealth and simultaneity. If all went well, they would mark twenty-seven targets before anyone noticed they were present. The killer missiles would leave the base camp in a single volley. Twenty-seven missiles would speed to the zones indicated on their guidance systems and zero in on the markers.

They would have burned up fewer calories if they had attacked during the dry season. Rhinos stayed closer to water holes then. The average distance between targets would have been cut in half. But the guards and the baboons would have been concentrated, too. This way they were slipping through a net that had bigger holes.

He was fixing his sights on his third target when his suit picked up an

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alarm blip. Wittgenmark had failed to report on schedule. Base camp had transmitted a query blip and the response had been received 4.3 seconds after Wittgenmark's suit should have transmitted it.

Shaldin released the marking missile and turned his attention to his tactical map display. Fifteen females had been marked—two short of the absolute minimum. They had known they might not mark all twenty-seven before someone alerted the guards, but they had hoped they could mark at least twenty—the seventeen they needed plus three spares for insurance.

It had to have been Wittgenmark, of course. He had probably been bumbling through the bush dreaming of all the times he would stand in front of a bar boasting that he had tagged eight of the beasts while everybody else had been marking five. And now—if he really had been captured—he was probably screaming for a lawyer one minute and telling the guards everything they needed to know the next. . . .

A 4.3 second delay didn't prove, by itself, that Wittgenmark had been captured. There were circumstances in which Wittgenmark's suit might have taken that long to respond even if it hadn't been interfered with. The tactical program was taking other factors into account—the length of time they had been prowling the sanctuary, the type of dispositions the guards might make in terrain like the area around Wittgenmark's last position, the probability Wittgenmark's behavior had increased the odds he would be spotted. And Wittgenmark's personality profile. That would be a factor, too.

Base camp's tactical program had made a judgment. Now it was up to Shaldin to evaluate its conclusion. If the program was wrong, the stalk should proceed as if nothing had happened. They could still try to mark at least seventeen animals before he gave the kill order. If the program was right, the guards could already be closing in.

Wittgenmark would have seen it as a "command decision"—the kind of moment that great generals prepared for all their lives. Fire now and cut their losses? Wait and run the risk they wouldn't kill a single animal?

The communications procedures they had worked out were efficient and economical. Shaldin didn't have to waste time vocalizing ID's and transmission instructions. The suit knew what it was supposed to do.

"Re*cord*: All marked targets. Fire. Trans*mit*."

His antenna rose above his helmet. The rush of adrenaline and hormones that surged through his bloodstream was so strong it made him feel like his entire body was on fire.

The missiles were expensive by civilian standards, small and cheap by military standards. Military missiles carried heavy warheads and traveled hundreds of kilometers to reach their targets. The deathload on the

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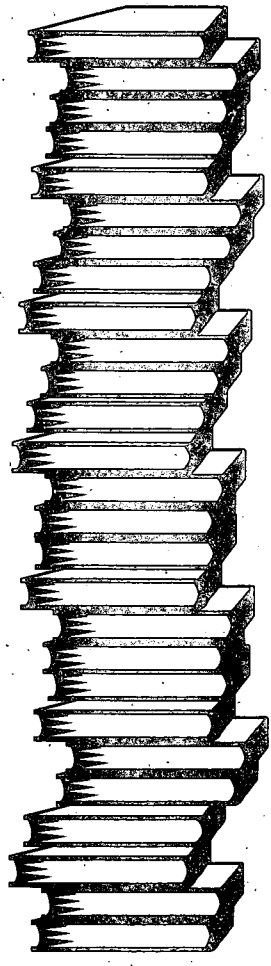

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killer missiles was as old as the art of hunting—a metal rod with a sharp point.

The fire control program had matched a missile with a destination as each target had been marked. The route the missiles would follow had been continuously updated. The first missiles in the volley crossed the river thirty seconds after Shaldin transmitted his order. The young woman who had twisted the control dial jumped to her feet when the red flames in their tails flicked on. The animals and birds on a small island in the middle of the river screamed in response to the roar of fifteen motors. Fifteen guidance programs arced the missiles over the big fence and settled them into level flight.

Their cruise altitude was about four meters. *Remember those pictures of Masai warriors standing with their spears at the vertical?* Wittgenmark had said. *With one leg crossed over the other? The missiles will cruise at just about the height of the spear point.*

Shaldin was crouching along the edge of a dry gully when he heard the first, far off sound of a motor. He had already put a couple of hundred meters between himself and his last target.

His cover animal snorted when it heard the noise. It lowered its head as if it was preparing to charge and he brought it to a halt. Three other motors had joined the chorus. A flicker of light caught his eye just before it vanished behind a rise on his left.

He didn't hear any screams from the target behind him but that didn't mean anything. The information that counted would appear on his face plate.

His antenna extended itself a minute after he had seen the flicker. Thirteen missiles had hit their mark—one less than the minimum he had hoped for when he had given the order. The marking unit attached itself to the rhino's hide with some kind of supersticky gunk. Their simulations had indicated some marking units would drop off in spite of the gunk, but the fail rate had only been 6 percent. This time it had been almost exactly twice that.

He crouched beside his big puppet and stared at the symbols on his face plate. A pair of silhouettes advised him two helicopters were passing overhead. Two more hunters had failed to report. The third had indicated he was switching to "evasion mode."

The orange dots that marked the targets on his display looked fuzzier. The security techies had located base camp. They couldn't match its frequency-hopping capabilities but their jamming techniques had degraded the quality of the information he was receiving.

He muttered a series of orders into his throat mike and the suit presented him with a zigzagging route that connected four targets. To reach every target, he would have to cover twelve kilometers before the guards

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stopped him.

His antenna accepted another blip from base camp. The security forces could deploy nine helicopters. Eight of them were already airborne. They were all traveling along paths that indicated they were probably looking for intruders.

The size and speed of the missile strike should have thrown them into confusion. At some point, they would see the pattern and realize they had to defend the females who were left. Right now, they were still concentrating on catching the hunters who had penetrated their defenses.

Shaldin had still been a child—he still hadn't reached his tenth birthday—the last time his heart had pounded like this. Dragondeath had been the big thing that year and one of his friends had whined one of the first sets out of his mother. They had gone out on the balcony outside his friend's bedroom and Shaldin had stood there forever—for half an hour at least—while Yoki jumped around the balcony, all goggled, gloved, and plastic sworded, yakking about the incredible things the dragon image in his goggles was doing, and explaining the reasoning behind his heroic responses. Shaldin had rolled Yoki's best skateboard across the balcony mostly because he was getting tired of just standing there. He had thought Yoki would just fall and maybe start crying. Yoki was the kind of fantasizer who always tried to slip away when real rough stuff started. It hadn't occurred to Shaldin that someone who was totally engrossed in a fantasy world might be taken completely by surprise and fall the way Yoki had fallen.

The pounding had started as soon as Shaldin had realized Yoki might be dead. He had thought he would go to jail. He had been absolutely certain he could even be executed.

The reaction from the adults had been one of the big surprises of his life. He had been so startled he had almost stopped crying when he had realized they were claiming they felt sorry for *him*. Didn't they realize he was a *murderer?* He had *killed* someone.

It had been days before he had decided he understood. His parents had carried on like they had because they had been afraid they would get in trouble if people thought he had known what he was doing. Yoki's mother was glad she didn't have to put up with her son's whines anymore.

Eventually Shaldin had realized there was more to it than that. They really did feel some of the things they said they felt. They felt a lot of other things, too, of course. Yoki's mother had started hanging around the apartment building swimming pool about three months after her son had died. Every time Shaldin had seen her in the elevator, there had been a different man with her. She never laughed at the men's jokes when she knew Shaldin was near her.

How much did most of the guards really care about the future of the

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smelly, dim-visioned biological machines they were supposed to protect? Most of them had probably taken the job for the salary. The people who provided the funds for the sanctuary might care some, but they handed over their money mostly because they thought they *should* care. How many people knew what they really wanted?

He stood up and clipped the male rhino's control unit on his belt. His hands dug into the top of the animal's big back. He stretched his right leg along its flank and carefully wiggled himself onto its spine.

This would only be the second time he had ridden one of the creatures. He would have to control the speed with a sensitive hand. Too fast and he would slide off his awkward, uncomfortable perch every time they lurched through a dip. Too slow and he would never get in range of all four targets.

The rhinos were already dead. Every hunter in the world would know four more kills would do the trick, once the media got hold of the information. Every hunter who could possibly afford a crack at the job would give it a try.

Sometime in the next few years, someone was going to make the kill that would push the population over the edge. The only question was who. And when.

The first target in the Final Four was only a couple of kilometers away, on the other side of a low stream. Four more kilometers brought him to the second, after a ride that took him into woody, rough country that offered him some shelter from the copters. By the time he marked that one and started on the third leg, it was obvious the guards had changed their strategy. Five of the helicopter symbols on his display were fanning out and rendezvousing with the fifty-nine females who were still living. The copters could hold about fifteen guards—maybe twenty if they were desperate. They could place one or two personal bodyguards around each female rhino.

He dug his thumb into the plastic controller and upped the rhino's speed another increment. Branches lashed at his suit as his mount bulldozed through the brush. Birds scurried into the air around him. Every time something threatened to knock him overboard, he had to fight the impulse to grab the box attached to the animal's neck. It was the only real hand hold on the rhino's entire back, but it was, of course, the one item he must not touch.

He had covered half the distance to the third target before his suit received another blip. The security system had won a point in the game it was playing with base camp's frequency-hopping program. Every now and then, the jammer program could strike it lucky and block the right frequency just as the base camp transmitter was emitting a blip. In theo-

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ry, the frequency-hopping program jumped from frequency to frequency in a totally random sequence. In practice, there was always some ghostly hint of a pattern. The jamming program couldn't predict the exact frequency the hopper would use next, but it could narrow down the possibilities and make a try.

It had been a full eight minutes since his last blip had reached him. The first thing he saw when he scanned the display was a helicopter symbol that was located in striking distance of the third target.

The target was located beside a line that represented a "stream"—which probably meant the female rhino was browsing on bushes that grew along a trickle of water that could have been produced by the drip from a faucet. For the last two hundred meters of the approach, Shaldin was supposed to ride up a rise that looked down on the stream bed. He knew he had lost the race with the copter as soon as he started thumping through the brush at the beginning of the rise.

The image on his face plate was almost as detailed as a daylight look at the real thing would have been. The heat emanating from every section of the helicopter gave the suit all the information it needed. The copter was hovering just above tree-top height, about a hundred meters from his target. Two men were crouching in the door. In a moment, if they followed the standard techniques the guards learned in training, they would jump out and trust their lives to the elastic cords attached to their harnesses.

It was one of those situations when he didn't know what he was going to do until he did it. This time, the news came to him in the form of his own voice muttering instructions to his suit.

"Re*cord*: Three targets . . . MM . . . OO . . . RR. Fire. Trans*mit*."

His thumb slid across the controller and pressed down. The rhino veered to the right—toward the helicopter—and rushed at the top of the slope as if it was accelerating into an all-out charge. Vertebrae banged into Shaldin's crotch every time he bounced.

The two guards jumped out of the helicopter as he started his assault. They disappeared below the top of the rise and the helicopter held its position while they dangled on the end of their cords. Fifty meters from the top of the slope, he brought the rhino to a halt and yanked the crossbow off his back as he hit the ground.

He was still concentrating on his trigger squeeze when the helicopter's spotlight flooded the inside of his helmet. It took him a moment to realize he had already released the marking arrow. His face plate adjusted to the light and he squinted at the copter's image through the confusion created by the voice bellowing at him through the copter's loudspeaker.

He had laid the red dot on the top third of the side window. The electronics in the helicopter were creating interference, but a glowing green

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blob indicated the marking arrow was clinging to the area he had targeted.

The loudspeaker was advising him some very terrible, very precise weapons were now trained on his body. The pilot, on the other hand, had apparently recognized the significance of the object that had attached itself to his window. The bottom half of the window was a separate panel that opened upward. The panel flipped up and an arm snaked around it and groped for the arrow.

Shaldin pressed himself against the side of his rhino. He couldn't see the copter but his electronics were still picking up the signals from the marking unit. The green blob would fall toward the bottom of his face plate if the pilot managed to reach the arrow and knock the unit off the window.

The reactive armor system built into Shaldin's suit was an elegant answer to the classic conflict between weight and effectiveness. A light, semi-living jelly filled the layer closest to his body. The area directly in front of an incoming bullet responded to the assault by pulling in material and spasming into a lump that resembled a mass of contracted muscle. A hit could still break bones and create huge bruises, however. And the armor could only stop two or three bullets before the jelly had to be replaced.

He knew the pilot had stopped trying to remove the marker as soon as he heard the change in the sound of the copter's engine. The copter started climbing straight up, with the marker still glued to the window, and Shaldin eased his faceplate above the rhino's back.

The kill missile he had requested entered the area from his left. The flame of its engine flashed at the edge of his vision. Then it was *there,* driving its point through the copter window, and creating fire and brightness all over the cockpit.

The missile had been programmed to zero in on the signal from the marking unit. Nothing in its programming could distinguish between a rhino and a helicopter.

Every now and then you got a little luck. The third target had run away from the crash, but he located her five minutes after the copter had gone down, landed the marker on her heaving flank, and immediately transmitted another fire command. Then he set off on his last stalk.

The next blip from base camp opened with a demand for an explanation. The guards were already beaming propaganda at the camp. Words like *accessory to murder* were being used.

The compression process distorted voices but he could still hear the clamor in the voice of the young woman who had recorded the message. "Can you verify the copter crash was an accident? Why did that last target receive two shots?"

"Record: Copter maneuvered too close to elevation in terrain. Crash

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disturbed target. Trans*mit*."

On his face plate, the four copter symbols closest to him had stopped dropping guards and started flying toward the crash site. Faced with a choice between guarding animals and rescuing their own kind, they had decided their own species was more important after all. They had responded pretty well up to now but none of their training simulations had covered an operation this size. They were trained to deal with hunters who slipped into the sanctuary and tried to kill one or two animals.

This was the first time in two decades anyone had shot at the guards. There had been a time when poaching had been a serious business. The market for natural rhino horn had still existed. Money had been at stake. For the last twenty years, it had been more like a game. The hunters had run when the guards had located them and surrendered without a fight when they were caught. The guards had been forced to take public opinion into account and treat the hunters as if they were merely overgrown pranksters. Wittgenmark had declared that a hunt like this was worth almost any risk, but they had all known they were facing, at worst, a five year jail sentence. By the time the lawyers and psychotherapists got through with the case, half the people in the world would probably feel the *hunters* were the victims.

It would be harder to make a defense now, of course. But what else could he have done? Was he supposed to let the hunt end in failure merely because Wittgenmark had let himself be caught?

He had always known he could go all the way, if he had to. He had been right on the edge just before he had left each of his wives, but he had pulled himself back both times. Grace had scampered out of the bedroom as soon as he had punched her, her backside swaying right and left in a rhythm that reminded him of the tail of a fleeing antelope. There had been a moment when he had *known,* for certain, that she had saved both of them when she had locked herself in the bathroom. He would have been sitting in a cell right now if she had let him hit her again.

With Pat, he had actually been holding the knife in his hand when he had heard the voice of the police officer standing in the door. Pat had let him back her into a corner—she had never been much of a tactician—but she had equipped herself with a personal silent alarm that gave the police her current lock code.

He had almost gone to jail over that. The knife had been a big Gurkha kukri, one of the prizes of his weapon collection, and the police officer had activated her video unit as soon as she had seen it. The only thing that had saved him had been Pat's greed. Pat had built her whole career on her image as a tough, no-nonsense manager. She had been convinced she would never get another promotion once her bosses started thinking of her as a victim.

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He wouldn't lose a thing if he pressed on and finished the job. He might even slip out of the sanctuary and get back across the river. One more kill would increase the confusion level one more notch.

And after he crossed the river? The only thing that would count then was success. There were people who would help you get away with anything if you succeeded.

He knew he was hurrying his control animal toward the obvious target. He was riding toward a mother and infant who were only three kilometers from the last target. They were the only target in seven kilometers that hadn't acquired a set of guards. It didn't matter. None of the rationalizations he was giving himself mattered.

He turned up the intensity on his imaging system and let himself ride through a landscape in which every bush glowed as if it had been touched by lightning. The flocks of birds that scattered in front of his mount glittered like raindrops that were falling in the wrong direction. He couldn't sing or yell—some part of him still knew there were things he couldn't do—but he could make the light shout for him.

He was a little over a kilometer from the target when his helmet produced a ping-and-flash that drew his attention to his right front. Three hundred meters ahead of him—at the very limit of the suit's close-in imaging system—a baboon was angling toward his line of travel. The suit had colored the image red—an indication the program was 90 percent certain it had come to the right conclusion when it had decided the animal was a baboon.

The antenna picked up another blip. The symbols on the map display rearranged themselves and he discovered the last target he had marked had already been hit. It was all settled! The target ahead was all he needed. Number seventeen. The final kill!

"We've decided to start breaking camp," the base camp communicator said. "The missile launchers will remain active for another thirty-five minutes. It's up to you what you do next. We're all pulling for you, but that's the biggest risk we feel we can take."

The baboon closed to a hundred meters. It turned just before it crossed his path and ran along ahead of him. The loudspeaker on its back wasn't very powerful but the audio equipment on his suit amplified the input.

"You are now under continuous surveillance," a voice with a Russian or Central European accent said. "Armed guards will soon have you surrounded. You cannot leave the sanctuary without becoming a prisoner. Please halt where you are. Dismount. Disarm yourself."

The person controlling the baboon was driving it as hard as Shaldin was driving his rhinoceros, but there was no way a ground-living primate could maintain a continuous surveillance on a four-footed behemoth. Shaldin was gaining on the baboon with every step his mount took.

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The guards could have placed a helicopter directly over him, if they wanted to. They hadn't—and the positions of the helicopter symbols on the map display indicated none of the copters had been moving this way when he had received that last blip. If there really were guards closing in on him, they were probably doing it on foot. They had learned it might be wise to keep their flying machines out of range.

The baboon jumped out of his way as he bore down on it. Then he was past it, plowing straight into a tangle of brush and grass with a violence that roused birds that had been nesting fifty meters on either side.

The target turned when she heard him charging through the night. She lowered her head and her calf scurried behind her. He brought the male to a halt within ninety meters and the target sniffed at the air and watched him warily.

The antenna rose above his helmet as he slipped off his rhino's back. "Re*cord*. Target VV. Fire two missiles. Sixty second interval. Trans*mit*."

He had never done anything that made his hands tremble. He hadn't even trembled the first time he had run his fingers along a naked female body. Now he had to steady himself just to slide the marking missile out of its container.

A frontal head shot required care. The rhino's braincase presented a narrow target from the front—as you would expect, given the magnitude of its mental powers.

The suit murmured a warning. The brush shook behind him. He hurled himself around and a snarling bundle of animal ferocity landed on his chest. He threw his arm in front of his face and the baboon's big teeth closed on his suit.

Curses from the baboon's loudspeaker mingled with the growls coming from the animal's jaws. Big wild eyes glared at him across his arm. Clumsy fingers clutched his shoulders. The armor had hardened in the area directly under the baboon's jaws but it wouldn't stay hard forever. It was designed to stop bullets, not a continuous pressure.

He had been wrestling with the baboon for several seconds before his brain finally focused on the camera mounted on the animal's shoulder—a cylinder that was a little bigger than a woman's thumb. The socket was implanted in the baboon's collar bone. He could feel his own lips curling over his teeth as he wrapped his free hand around the lens and leveraged the camera free.

The controller didn't terminate the attack as soon as the camera went dead. Shaldin had to close his hand around the baboon's nose and force its head back before the controller pulled the animal away from him.

The baboon scurried backward and Shaldin looked down at it and shook his head. The attack had been a total surprise. The baboon was an unarmed surveillance animal. Its controller must be getting desperate.

"Your situation is hopeless," the baboon's loudspeaker said. "Your ac-

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complices have presented complete confessions, Monsieur Shaldin. We know your name. We know your home address."

Shaldin picked up his crossbow. The target had backed away when the baboon had attacked but she had resumed browsing a hundred meters from her first position. He left the male rhino standing motionless and hurried through the brush with a new marking missile locked in the crossbow.

The first killer missile rammed into the target's flank ten seconds after he released the marking missile. The target stiffened and then settled to the ground as if someone had flipped open an air valve. A tiny silver 17 glittered like a firework at the top of Shaldin's display. His suit flashed a pre-programmed victory blip at base camp.

His suit picked up the line of guards as he was turning away from the carcass. There were ten of them and they were advancing in a ragged skirmish line, with one guard lagging a few steps behind the center of the line, in the spot where "leaders" usually placed themselves.

The suit had already plotted an "exit route" on Shaldin's map display. It had analyzed the situation while he was making the stalk and decided he should work his way north, through a heavily gullied area, before he turned back to the river. Once he reached the boundary area, he could set off every alarm he encountered, as long as he reached the river before the guards closed in. Then, if everything worked the way it was supposed to, he would throw himself on a one-man skimboat that had been programmed to home on his suit. . . .

Unfortunately, the suit's analysis was already out of date. The guards had spotted Shaldin a few seconds after he saw them. The guard who was occupying the officer's position gestured with both arms and they changed face twenty degrees and extended their line as they formed an arc.

Shaldin's antenna pulled another blip out of the air. The communicator's excited voice boomed in his helmet. Base camp had received his victory blip and swung into action. The victory announcement was *already* on its way to the media. The legal fund had *already* been activated. The first legal briefs were supposed to arrive in-country *within an hour*.

"Everybody here wants you to know-the legal staff thinks the legal situation looks like it may have a lot of give," the communicator said. "This will be our last message but we all want you to know we haven't stopped working. Don't assume you can't beat the worst part of the rap if you don't get away. The legal staff has given us some very promising thoughts."

Shaldin had spent five hours in police custody after the incident with his second wife. He had observed the realities of cop behavior with the close attention of someone who had discovered the subject could be personally important, and he had come to a few conclusions. He positioned

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himself the maximum distance from the nearest cover and remained absolutely motionless while the guards closed the distance to fifty meters. Two microscopic red dots glowed above the guns directly in front of him.

He held out the crossbow with one hand, gripping the stock with his thumb and two fingers, and let it drop. He raised his arms—slowly, with no sudden movements—and walked toward the guard who had been giving the orders.

The guard leader eyed Shaldin through a set of goggles that were, conservatively, ten years older than the night vision technology built into Shaldin's suit. They could have shot him right there. Every guard in the group would have sworn he had been trying to escape. Two of their own people had died, after all. But they didn't shoot, of course. They threw him on the helicopter as if he was a sack of potatoes and cheered when his head collided with the edge of a seat. They brought him to his arraignment with his right wrist and left knee broken by boot heels and the judge solemnly agreed that both breaks and all the rest of the visible damage had been "inflicted while resisting arrest." But they didn't kill him. They knew exactly where the line was located. They always pulled back just before they grazed it. They knew their employers would be very unhappy if their organization became mired in endless wrangles with the lawyers and the news media. They carefully avoided any action that jeopardized their jobs and pensions. As Shaldin had known they would.

The boy didn't fit the profile the zoo guard was looking for. His clothes were too shabby. He was only about eight or nine. The guard was eyeing someone else when the boy pulled the miniature laser spotter out of his shirt pocket. The guard didn't know she had a problem until she heard the gasp from the line of patrons scattered along the rhinoceros moat.

Most of the people in the line had started running before the guard took her first step. The boy had already planted the dot on the oldest and most popular rhinoceros in the compound. A fat, middle-aged man had dropped a little girl's hand and lurched into a clumsy waddle. The man was advancing toward the boy with his arms stretched in front of him as if he really thought he could outmaneuver an agile nine-year-old. The guard yelled at the man to run clear, look after the girl, and he stared at her for a long, dreamlike second before he realized he was being stupid and turned back to his daughter.

Afterward, the girl claimed she saw another man toss the real homing device into the compound. He was wearing a SAVE THE HIMALAYAS T-shirt, the girl said. And he was very old. As old as her oldest uncle. He had been the very man the guard had been watching, in fact.

The real homing device produced a soft orange glow, not a dot. It looked almost warm—like a campfire, or a friendly porch light. Twelve thousand feet above the city, a missile entered the airspace over the zoo,

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spotted the distant glow, and dove.

The boy claimed he had been paid two hundred dollars. He had been told the laser spotter was a complete fake and the woman who had told him that—if it really had been a woman—hadn't been lying. The "spotter" was just an ordinary high-intensity flashlight—as the guard would have realized if she had been examining the dot in a calmer state of mind. The boy screamed when they confiscated the money, but he eventually closed his eyes and rattled off a complete description of the woman who had given it to him. He became a lot more informative after his big sister entered the interrogation room.

The explosive warhead killed one female rhino outright. The other major casualty, a fertile male in the prime of life, had to be euthanasized two days after the incident. The next week, at the monthly meeting of the Board of Directors, eleven of the most respected men and women in the metropolitan area examined the budget for a complete, round-the-clock, state-of-the-art security system for the rhinoceros exhibit. Then they began to wonder if the zoo should *have* a rhinoceros exhibit. This was the third time a zoo had been hit in the last fifteen months.

"It's just like graffiti," murmured the CEO of the second-largest bank in the region. "Once it becomes the thing to do. . . ." ●

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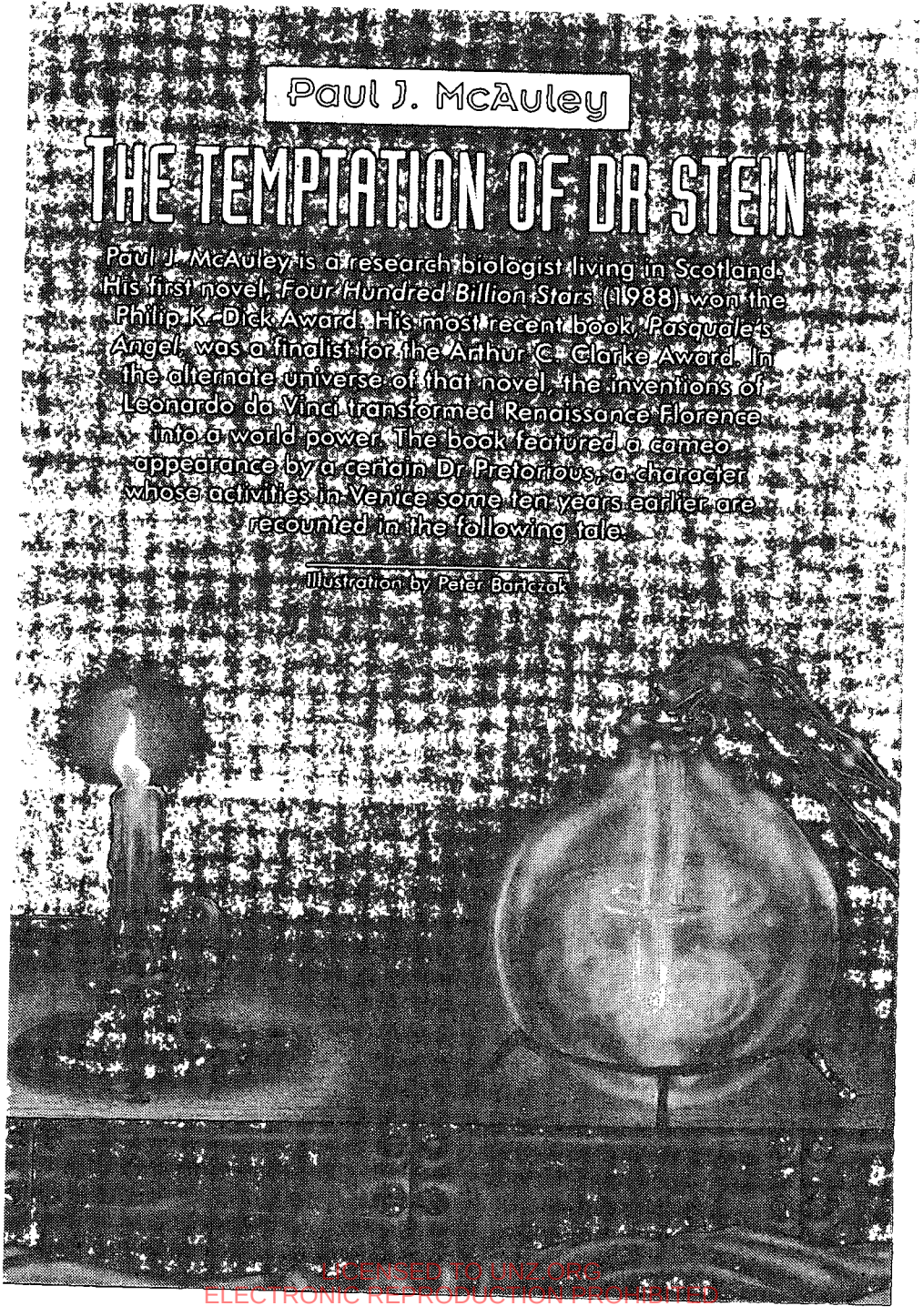
Paul J. McAuley

THE TEMPTATION OF DR STEIN

Paul J. McAuley is a research biologist living in Scotland. His first novel, *Four Hundred Billion Stars* (1988) won the Philip K. Dick Award. His most recent book, *Pasquale's Angel*, was a finalist for the Arthur C. Clarke Award. In the alternate universe of that novel, the inventions of Leonardo da Vinci transformed Renaissance Florence into a world power. The book featured a cameo appearance by a certain Dr Pretorious, a character whose activities in Venice some ten years earlier are recounted in the following tale.

Illustration by Peter Bartczak



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Dr Stein prided himself on being a rational man. When, in the months following his arrival in Venice, it became his habit to spend his free time wandering the city, he could not admit that it was because he believed that his daughter might still live, and that he might see her amongst the cosmopolitan throng. For he harbored the small, secret hope that when *Landsknechts* had pillaged the houses of the Jews of Lodz, perhaps his daughter had not been carried off to be despoiled and murdered, but had instead been forced to become a servant of some Prussian family. It was no more impossible that she had been brought here, for the Council of Ten had hired many *Landsknechts* to defend the city and the *terra firma* hinterlands of its empire.

Dr Stein's wife would no longer talk to him about it. Indeed, they hardly talked about anything these days. She had pleaded that the memory of their daughter should be laid to rest in a week of mourning, just as if they had interred her body. They were living in rooms rented from a cousin of Dr Stein's wife, a banker called Abraham Soncino, and Dr Stein was convinced that she had been put up to this by the women of Soncino's family. Who knew what the women talked about, when locked in the bathhouse overnight, while they were being purified of their menses? No good, Dr Stein was certain. Even Soncino, a genial, uxorious man, had urged that Dr Stein mourn his daughter. Soncino had said that his family would bring the requisite food to begin the mourning; after a week all the community would commiserate with Dr Stein and his wife before the main Sabbath service, and with God's help this terrible wound would be healed. It had taken all of Dr Stein's powers to refuse this generous offer courteously. Soncino was a good man, but this was none of his business.

As winter came on, driven out by his wife's silent recriminations, or so he told himself, Dr Stein walked the crowded streets almost every afternoon. Sometimes he was accompanied by an English captain of the Night Guard, Henry Gorrall, to whom Dr Stein had become an unofficial assistant, helping identify the cause of death of one or another of the bodies found floating in the backwaters of the city.

There had been more murders than usual that summer, and several well-bred young women had disappeared. Dr Stein had been urged to help Gorrall by the Elders of the *Beth Din;* already there were rumors that the Jews were murdering Christian virgins and using their blood to animate a Golem. It was good that a Jew—moreover, a Jew who worked at the city hospital, and taught new surgical techniques at the school of medicine—was involved in attempting to solve this mystery.

Besides, Dr Stein enjoyed Gorrall's company. He was sympathetic to Gorrall's belief that everything, no matter how unlikely, had at base a rational explanation. Gorrall was a humanist, and did not mind being seen in the company of a man who must wear a yellow star on his coat. On their walks through the city, they often talked on the new philosophies of

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nature compounded in the University of Florence's Great Engineer, Leonardo da Vinci, quite oblivious to the brawling bustle all around them.

Ships from twenty nations crowded the quay in the long shadow of the Campanile, and their sailors washed through the streets. Hawkers cried their wares from flotillas of small boats that rocked on the wakes of barges or galleys. Gondoliers shouted vivid curses as skiffs crossing from one side of the Grand Canal to the other got in the way of their long, swift craft. Sometimes a screw-driven Florentine ship made its way up the Grand Canal, its Hero's engine laying a trail of black smoke, and everyone stopped to watch this marvel. Bankers in fur coats and tall felt hats conducted the business of the world in the piazza before San Giacometto, amid the rattle of the new clockwork abacuses and the subdued murmur of transactions.

Gorrall, a bluff muscular man with a bristling black beard and a habit of spitting sideways and often, because of the plug of tobacco he habitually chewed, seemed to know most of the bankers by name, and most of the merchants, too—the silk and cloth-of-gold mercers and sellers of fustian and velvet along the Mercerie, the druggists, goldsmiths and silversmiths, the makers of white wax, the ironmongers, coopers and perfumers who had stalls and shops in the crowded little streets off the Rialto. He knew the names of many of the yellow-scarved prostitutes, too, although Dr Stein wasn't surprised at this, since he had first met Gorrall when the captain had come to the hospital for mercury treatment of his syphilis. Gorrall even knew, or pretended to know, the names of the cats which stalked between the feet of the crowds or lazed on cold stone in the brittle winter sunshine, the true rulers of Venice.

It was outside the cabinet of one of the perfumers of the Mercerie that Dr Stein for a moment thought he saw his daughter. A grey-haired man was standing in the doorway of the shop, shouting at a younger man who was backing away and shouting that there was no blame that could be fixed to his name.

"You are his friend!"

"Sir, I did not know what it was he wrote, and I do not know and I do not care why your daughter cries so!"

The young man had his hand on his long knife, and Gorrall pushed through the gathering crowd and told both men to calm down. The wronged father dashed inside and came out again, dragging a girl of about fourteen, with the same long black hair, the same white, high forehead, as Dr Stein's daughter.

"Hannah," Dr Stein said helplessly, but then she turned, and it was not her. Not his daughter. The girl was crying, and clasped a sheet of paper to her bosom—wronged by a suitor, Dr Stein supposed, and Gorrall said that it was precisely that. The young man had run off to sea, something

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so common these days that the Council of Ten had decreed that convicted criminals might be used on the galleys of the navy because of the shortage of free oarsman. Soon the whole city might be scattered between Corfu and Crete, or even further, now that Florence had destroyed the fleet of Cortés, and opened the American shore.

Dr Stein did not tell his wife what he had seen. He sat in the kitchen long into the evening, and was still there, warmed by the embers of the fire and reading in Leonardo's *Treatise on the Replication of Motion* by the poor light of a tallow candle, when the knock at the door came. It was just after midnight. Dr Stein picked up the candle and went out, and saw his wife standing in the door to the bedroom.

"Don't answer it," she said. With one hand she clutched her shift to her throat; with the other she held a candle. Her long black hair, streaked with grey, was down to her shoulders.

"This isn't Lodz, Belita," Dr Stein said, perhaps with unnecessary sharpness. "Go back to bed. I will deal with this."

"There are plenty of Prussians here, even so. One spat at me the other day. Abraham says that they blame us for the body snatching, and it's the doctors they'll come for first."

The knocking started again. Husband and wife both looked at the door. "It may be a patient," Dr Stein said, and pulled back the bolts.

The rooms were on the ground floor of a rambling house that faced onto a narrow canal. An icy wind was blowing along the canal, and it blew out Dr Stein's candle when he opened the heavy door. Two city guards stood there, flanking their captain, Henry Gorrall.

"There's been a body found," Gorrall said in his blunt, direct manner. "A woman we both saw this very day, as it happens. You'll come along and tell me if it's murder."

The woman's body had been found floating in the Rio di Noale. "An hour later," Gorrall said, as they were rowed through the dark city, "and the tide would have turned and taken her out to sea, and neither you nor I would have to chill our bones."

It was a cold night indeed, just after St Agnes Eve. An insistent wind off the land blew a dusting of snow above the roofs and prickly spires of Venice. Fresh ice crackled as the gondola broke through it, and larger pieces knocked against its planking. The few lights showing in the façades of the *palazzos* that lined the Grand Canal seemed bleary and dim. Dr Stein wrapped his ragged loden cloak around himself and asked, "Do you think it murder?"

Gorrall spat into the black, icy water. "She died for love. That part is easy, as we witnessed the quarrel this very afternoon. She wasn't in the water long, and still reeks of booze. Drank to get her courage up, jumped. But we have to be sure. It could be a bungled kidnapping, or some cruel

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sport gone from bad to worse. There are too many soldiers with nothing to do but patrol the defenses and wait for a posting in Cyprus."

The drowned girl had been laid out on the pavement by the canal, and covered with a blanket. Even at this late hour, a small crowd had gathered, and when a guard twitched the blanket aside at Dr Stein's request, some of the watchers gasped.

It was the girl he had seen that afternoon, the perfumer's daughter. The soaked dress which clung to her body was white against the wet flags of the pavement. Her long black hair twisted in ropes about her face. There was a little froth at her mouth, and blue touched her lips. Dead, there was nothing about her that reminded Dr Stein of his daughter.

Dr Stein manipulated the skin over the bones of her hand, pressed one of her fingernails, closed her eyelids with thumb and forefinger. Tenderly, he covered her with the blanket again. "She's been dead less than an hour," he told Gorrall. "There's no sign of a struggle, and from the flux at her mouth I'd say it's clear she drowned."

"Killed herself most likely, unless someone pushed her in. The usual reason, I'd guess, which is why her boyfriend ran off to sea. Care to make a wager?"

"We both know her story. I can find out if she was with child, but not here."

Gorrall smiled. "I forget that you people don't bet."

"On the contrary. But in this case I fear you're right."

Gorrall ordered his men to take the body to the city hospital. As they lifted it into the gondola, he said to Dr Stein, "She drank to get courage, then gave herself to the water. Not in this little canal. Suicides favor places where their last sight is a view, often of a place they love. We'll search the bridge at the Rialto—it is the only bridge crossing the Grand Canal, and the tide is running from that direction—but all the world crosses there, and if we're not quick, some beggar will have carried away her bottle and any note she may have left. Come on, doctor. We need to find out how she died before her parents turn up and start asking questions. I must have something to tell them, or they will go out looking for revenge."

If the girl had jumped from the Rialto bridge, she had left no note there—or it had been stolen, as Gorrall had predicted. Gorrall and Dr Stein hurried on to the city hospital, but the body had not arrived. Nor did it. An hour later, a patrol found the gondola tied up in a backwater. One guard was dead from a single swordcut to his neck. The other was stunned, and remembered nothing. The drowned girl was gone.

Gorrall was furious, and sent out every man he had to look for the body snatchers. They had balls to attack two guards of the night watch, he said, but when he had finished with them they'd sing falsetto under the lash on the galleys. Nothing came of his inquiries. The weather turned

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colder, and an outbreak of pleurisy meant that Dr Stein had much work in the hospital. He thought no more about it until a week later, when Gorrall came to see him.

"She's alive," Gorrall said. "I've seen her."

"A girl like her, perhaps." For a moment, Dr Stein saw his daughter, running towards him, arms widespread. He said, "I don't make mistakes. There was no pulse, her lungs were congested with fluid, and she was as cold as the stones on which she lay."

Gorrall spat. "She's walking around dead, then. Do you remember what she looked like?"

"Vividly."

"She was the daughter of a perfumer, one Filippo Rompiasi. A member of the Great Council, although of the two thousand five hundred who have that honor, I'd say he has about the least influence. A noble family so long fallen on hard times that they have had to learn a trade." Gorrall had little time for the numerous aristocracy of Venice, who, in his opinion, spent more time scheming to obtain support from the Republic than playing their part in governing it. "Still," he said, scratching at his beard and looking sidelong at Dr Stein, "it'll look very bad that the daughter of a patrician family walks around after having been pronounced dead by the doctor in charge of her case."

"I don't recall being paid," Dr Stein said.

Gorrall spat again. "Would I pay someone who can't tell the quick from the dead? Come and prove me wrong and I'll pay you from my own pocket. With a distinguished surgeon as witness, I can draw up a docket to end this matter."

The girl was under the spell of a mountebank who called himself Dr Pretorious, although Gorrall was certain that it wasn't the man's real name. "He was thrown out of Padua last year for practicing medicine without a license, and was in jail in Milan before that. I've had my eye on him since he came ashore on a Prussian coal barge this summer. He vanished a month ago, and I thought he'd become some other city's problem. Instead, he went to ground. Now he proclaims this girl to be a miraculous example of a new kind of treatment."

There were many mountebanks in Venice. Every morning and afternoon there were five or six stages erected in the Piazza San Marco for their performances and convoluted orations, in which they praised the virtues of their peculiar instruments, powders, elixirs and other concoctions. Venice tolerated these madmen, in Dr Stein's opinion, because the miasma of the nearby marshes befuddled the minds of her citizens, who besides were the most vain people he had ever met, eager to believe any promise of enhanced beauty and longer life.

Unlike the other mountebanks, Dr Pretorious was holding a secret

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court. He had rented a disused wine store at the edge of the Prussian *Fondaco,* a quarter of Venice where ships were packed tightly in the narrow canals and every other building was a merchant's warehouse. Even walking beside a captain of the city guard, Dr Stein was deeply uneasy there, feeling that all eyes were drawn to the yellow star he must by law wear, pinned to the breast of his surcoat. There had been an attack on the synagogue just the other day, and pigshit had been smeared on the mezuzah fixed to the doorpost of a prominent Jewish banker. Sooner or later, if the body snatchers were not caught, a mob would sack the houses of the wealthiest Jews on the excuse of searching out and destroying the fabled Golem which existed nowhere but in their inflamed imaginations.

Along with some fifty others, mostly rich old women and their servants, Gorrall and Dr Stein crossed a high arched bridge over a dark, silently running canal, and, after paying a ruffian a soldo each for the privilege, entered through a gate into a courtyard lit by smoky torches. Once the ruffian had closed and locked the gate, two figures appeared at a tall open door that was framed with swags of red cloth.

One was a man dressed all in black, with a mop of white hair. Behind him a woman in white lay half-submerged in a kind of tub packed full of broken ice. Her head was bowed, and her face hidden by a fall of black hair. Gorrall nudged Dr Stein and said that this was the girl.

"She looks dead to me. Anyone who could sit in a tub of ice and not burst to bits through shivering must be dead."

"Let's watch and see," Gorrall said, and lit a foul-smelling cigarillo.

The white-haired man, Dr Pretorious, welcomed his audience, and began a long rambling speech. Dr Stein paid only a little attention, being more interested in the speaker. Dr Pretorious was a gaunt, bird-like man with a clever, lined face and dark eyes under shaggy brows which knitted together when he made a point. He had a habit of stabbing a finger at his audience, of shrugging and laughing immodestly at his own boasts. He did not, Dr Stein was convinced, much believe his speech, a curious failing for a mountebank.

Dr Pretorious had the honor, it appeared, of introducing the true Bride of the Sea, one recently dead but now animated by an ancient Egyptian science. There was much on the long quest he had made in search of the secret of this ancient science, and the dangers he had faced in bringing it here, and in perfecting it. He assured his audience that as it had conquered death, the science he had perfected would also conquer old age, for was that not the slow victory of death over life? He snapped his fingers, and, as the tub seemed to slide forward of its own accord into the torchlight, invited his audience to see for themselves that this Bride of the Sea was not alive.

Strands of kelp had been woven into the drowned girl's thick black

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hair. Necklaces layered at her breast were of seashells of the kind that anyone could pick from the beach at the mouth of the lagoon.

Dr Pretorious pointed to Dr Stein, called him out. "I see we have here a physician. I recognize you, sir. I know the good work that you do at the Pietà, and the wonderful new surgical techniques you have brought to the city. As a man of science, would you do me the honor of certifying that this poor girl is at present not living?"

"Go on," Gorrall said, and Dr Stein stepped forward, feeling both foolish and eager.

"Please, your opinion," Dr Pretorious said with an ingratiating bow. He added, *sotto voce,* "This is a true marvel, doctor. Believe in me." He held a little mirror before the girl's red lips, and asked Dr Stein if he saw any evidence of breath.

Dr Stein was aware of an intense sweet, cloying odor: a mixture of brandy and attar of roses. He said, "I see none."

"Louder, for the good people here."

Dr Stein repeated his answer.

"A good answer. Now, hold her wrist. Does her heart beat?"

The girl's hand was as cold as the ice from which Dr Pretorious lifted it. If there was a pulse, it was so slow and faint that Dr Stein was not allowed enough time to find it. He was dismissed, and Dr Pretorious held up the girl's arm by the wrist and, with a grimace of effort, pushed a long nail though her hand.

"You see," he said with indecent excitement, giving the wrist a little shake so that the pierced hand flopped to and fro. "You see! No blood! No blood! Eh? What living person could endure such a cruel mutilation?"

He seemed excited by his demonstration. He dashed inside the doorway, and brought forward a curious device, a glass bowl inverted on a stalk of glass almost as tall as he, with a band of red silk twisted inside the bowl and around a spindle at the bottom of the stalk. He began to work a treadle, and the band of silk spun around and around.

"A moment," Dr Pretorious said, as the crowd began to murmur. He glared at them from beneath his shaggy eyebrows as his foot pumped the treadle. "A moment, if you please. The apparatus must receive a sufficient charge."

He sounded flustered and out of breath. Any mountebank worth his salt would have had a naked boy painted in gilt and adorned with cherub wings to work the treadle, Dr Stein reflected, and a drumroll besides. Yet the curious amateurism of this performance was more compelling than the polished theatricality of the mountebanks of the Piazza San Marco.

Gold threads trailed from the top of the glass bowl to a big glass jar half-filled with water and sealed with a cork. At last, Dr Pretorious finished working the treadle, sketched a bow to the audience—his face shiny with sweat—and used a stave to sweep the gold threads from the

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top of the glass bowl onto the girl's face.

There was a faint snap, as of an old glass broken underfoot at a wedding. The girl's eyes opened and she looked about her, seeming dazed and confused.

"She lives, but only for a few precious minutes," Dr Pretorious said. "Speak to me, my darling. You are a willing bride to the sea, perhaps?"

Gorrall whispered to Dr Stein, "That's definitely the girl who drowned herself?" and Dr Stein nodded. Gorrall drew out a long silver whistle and blew on it, three quick blasts. At once, a full squad of men-at-arms swarmed over the high walls. Some of the old women in the audience started to scream. The ruffian in charge of the gate charged at Gorrall, who drew a repeating pistol with a notched wheel over its stock. He shot three times, the wheel ratcheting around as it delivered fresh charges of powder and shot to the chamber. The ruffian was thrown onto his back, already dead as the noise of the shots echoed in the courtyard. Gorrall turned and leveled the pistol at the red-cloaked doorway, but it was on fire, and Dr Pretorious and the dead girl in her tub of ice were gone.

Gorrall and his troops put out the fire and ransacked the empty wine store. It was Dr Stein who found the only clue, a single broken seashell by a hatch that, when lifted, showed black water a few *braccia* below, a passage that Gorrall soon determined led out into the canal.

Dr Stein could not forget the dead girl, the icy touch of her skin, her sudden start into life, the confusion in her eyes. Gorrall thought that she only seemed alive, that her body had been preserved perhaps by tanning, that the shine in her eyes was glycerin, the bloom on her lips pigment of the kind the apothecaries made of powdered beetles.

"The audience wanted to believe it would see a living woman, and the flickering candles would make her seem to move. You'll be a witness, I hope."

"I touched her," Dr Stein said. "She was not preserved. The process hardens the skin."

"We keep meat by packing it in snow, in winter," Gorrall said. "Also, I have heard that there are magicians in the far Indies who can fall into so deep a trance that they do not need to breathe."

"We know she is not from the Indies. I would ask why so much fuss was made of the apparatus. It was so clumsy that it seemed to me to be real."

"I'll find him," Gorrall said, "and we will have answers to all these questions."

But when Dr Stein saw Gorrall two days later, and asked about his inquiries into the Pretorious affair, the English captain shook his head and said, "I have been told not to pursue the matter. It seems the girl's father wrote too many begging letters to the Great Council, and he has no friends there. Further than that, I'm not allowed to say." Gorrall spat and

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said with sudden bitterness, "You can work here twenty-five years, Stein, and perhaps they'll make you a citizen, but they will never make you privy to their secrets."

"Someone in power believes Dr Pretorious's claims, then."

"I wish I could say. Do you believe him?"

"Of course not."

But it was not true, and Dr Stein immediately made his own inquiries. He wanted to know the truth, and not, he told himself, because he had mistaken the girl for his daughter. His interest was that of a doctor, for if death could be reversed, then surely that was the greatest gift a doctor could possess. He was not thinking of his daughter at all.

His inquiries were first made amongst his colleagues at the city hospital, and then in the guild hospitals and the new hospital of the Arsenal. Only the director of the last was willing to say anything, and warned Dr Stein that the man he was seeking had powerful allies.

"So I have heard," Dr Stein said. He added recklessly, "I wish I knew who they were."

The director was a pompous man, placed in his position through politics rather than merit. Dr Stein could see that he was tempted to divulge what he knew, but in the end he merely said, "Knowledge is a dangerous thing. If you would know anything, start from a low rather than a high place. Don't overreach yourself, Doctor."

Dr Stein bridled at this, but said nothing. He sat up through the night, thinking the matter over. This was a city of secrets, and he was a stranger, and a Jew from Prussia to boot. His actions could easily be mistaken for those of a spy, and he was not sure that Gorrall could help him if he was accused. Gorrall's precipitous attempt to arrest Dr Pretorious had not endeared him to his superiors, after all.

Yet Dr Stein could not get the drowned girl's face from his mind, the way she had given a little start and her eyes had opened under the tangle of gold threads. Tormented by fantasies in which he found his daughter's grave and raised her up, he paced the kitchen, and in the small hours of the night it came to him that the director of the Arsenal hospital had spoken the truth even if he had not known it.

In the morning, Dr Stein set out again, saying nothing to his wife of what he was doing. He had realized that Dr Pretorious must need simples and other necessaries for his trade, and now he went from apothecary to apothecary with the mountebank's description. Dr Stein found his man late in the afternoon, in a mean little shop in a *calle* that led off a square dominated by the brightly painted facade of the new church of Santa Maria di Miracoli.

The apothecary was a young man with a handsome face but small, greedy eyes. He peered at Dr Stein from beneath a fringe of greasy black

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hair, and denied knowing Dr Pretorious with such vehemence that Dr Stein did not doubt he was lying.

A soldo soon loosened his tongue. He admitted that he might have such a customer as Dr Stein described, and Dr Stein asked at once, "Does he buy alum and oil?"

The apothecary expressed surprise. "He is a physician, not a tanner."

"Of course," Dr Stein said, hope rising in him. A second soldo bought Dr Stein the privilege of delivering the mountebank's latest order, a jar of sulfuric acid nested in a straw cradle.

The directions given by the apothecary led Dr Stein through an intricate maze of *calles* and squares, ending in a courtyard no bigger than a closet, with tall buildings soaring on either side, and no way out but the narrow passage by which he had entered. Dr Stein knew he was lost, but before he could turn to begin to retrace his steps, someone seized him from behind. An arm clamped across his throat. He struggled and dropped the jar of acid, which by great good luck, and the straw padding, did not break. Then he was on his back, looking up at a patch of grey sky which seemed to rush away from him at great speed, dwindling to a speck no bigger than a star.

Dr Stein was awakened by the solemn tolling of the curfew bells. He was lying on a moldering bed in a room muffled by dusty tapestries and lit by a tall tallow candle. His throat hurt and his head ached. There was a tender swelling above his right ear, but he had no double vision or dizziness. Whoever had hi[illegible]im had known what they were about.

The door was lock[illegible] and the windows were closed by wooden shutters nailed tightly shut. [illegible] Stein was prying at the shutters when the door was unlocked and an old man came in. He was a shriveled gnome in a velvet tunic and doublet more suited to a young gallant. His creviced face was drenched with powder, and there were hectic spots of rouge on his sunken cheeks.

"My master will talk with you," this ridiculous creature said.

Dr Stein asked where he was, and the old man said that it was his master's house. "Once it was mine, but I gave it to him. It was his fee."

"Ah. You were sick, and he cured you."

"I was cured of life. He killed me and brought me back, so that I will live forever in the life beyond death. He's a great man."

"What's your name?"

The old man laughed. He had only one tooth in his head, and that a blackened stump. "I've yet to be christened in this new life. Come with me."

Dr Stein followed the old man up a wide marble stair that wound through the middle of what must be a great *palazzo*. Two stories below was a floor tiled black and white like a chessboard; they climbed past two

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more floors to the top.

The long room had once been a library, but the shelves of the dark bays set off the main passage were empty now; only the chains which had secured the books were left. It was lit by a scattering of candles whose restless flames cast a confusion of flickering light that hid more than it revealed. One bay was penned-off with a hurdle, and a pig moved in the shadows there. Dr Stein had enough of a glimpse of it to see that there was something on the pig's back, but it was too dark to be sure quite what it was. Then something the size of a mouse scuttled straight in front of him—Dr Stein saw with a shock that it ran on its hind legs, with a stumbling, crooked gait.

"One of my children," Dr Pretorious said.

He was seated at a plain table scattered with books and papers. Bits of glassware and jars of acids and salts cluttered the shelves that rose behind him. The drowned girl sat beside him in a high-backed chair. Her head was held up by a leather band around her forehead; her eyes were closed and seemed bruised and sunken. Behind the chair was the same apparatus that Dr Stein had seen used in the wine store. The smell of attar of roses was very strong.

Dr Stein said, "It was only a mouse, or a small rat."

"You believe what you must, doctor," Dr Pretorious said, "but I hope to open your eyes to the wonders I have performed." He told the old man, "Fetch food."

The old man started to complain that he wanted to stay, and Dr Pretorious immediately jumped up in a sudden fit of anger and threw a pot of ink at his servant. The old man sputtered, smearing the black ink across his powdered face, and at once Dr Pretorious burst into laughter. "You're a poor book," he said. "Fetch our guest meat and wine. It's the least I can do," he told Dr Stein. "Did you come here of your own will, by the way?"

"I suppose the apothecary told you that I asked for you. That is, if he was an apothecary."

Dr Pretorious said, with a quick smile, "You wanted to see the girl, I suppose, and here she is. I saw the tender look you gave her, before we were interrupted, and see that same look again."

"I knew nothing of my colleague's plans."

Dr Pretorious made a steeple with his hands, touched the tip of the steeple to his bloodless lips. His fingers were long and white, and seemed to have an extra joint in them. He said, "Don't hope he'll find you."

"I'm not afraid. You brought me here because you wanted me here."

"But you should be afraid. I have power of life and death here."

"The old man said you gave him life everlasting."

Dr Pretorious said carelessly, "Oh, so he believes. Perhaps that's enough."

"Did he die? Did you bring him back to life?"

Dr Pretorious said, "That depends on what you mean by life. The trick

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is not raising the dead, but making sure that death does not reclaim them."

Dr Stein had seen a panther two days after he had arrived in Venice, brought from the Friendly Isles along with a great number of parrots. So starved that the bones of its shoulders and pelvis were clearly visible under its sleek black pelt, the panther ceaselessly padded back and forth inside its little cage, its eyes like green lamps. It had been driven mad by the voyage, and Dr Stein thought that Dr Pretorious was as mad as that panther, his sensibility quite lost on the long voyage into the unknown regions which he claimed to have conquered. In truth, they had conquered him.

"I have kept her on ice for much of the time," Dr Pretorious said. "Even so, she is beginning to deteriorate." He twitched the hem of the girl's gown, and Dr Stein saw on her right foot a black mark as big as his hand, like a sunken bruise. Despite the attar of roses, the reek of gangrene was suddenly overpowering.

He said, "The girl is dead. I saw it for myself, when she was pulled from the canal. No wonder she rots."

"It depends what you mean by death. Have you ever seen fish in a pond, under ice? They can become so sluggish that they no longer move. And yet they live, and when warmed will move again. I was once in Gotland. In winter, the nights last all day, and your breath freezes in your beard. A man was found alive after two days lying in a drift of snow. He had drunk too much, and had passed out; the liquor had saved him from freezing to death, although he lost his ears and his fingers and toes. This girl was dead when she was pulled from the icy water, but she had drunk enough to prevent death from placing an irreversible claim on her body. I returned her to life. Would you like to see how it is done?"

"Master?"

It was the old man. With cringing deference, he offered a tray bearing a tarnished silver wine decanter, a plate of beef, heavily salted and greenish at the edges, and a loaf of black bread.

Dr Pretorious was on him in an instant. The food and wine flew into the air; Dr Pretorious lifted the old man by his neck, dropped him to the floor. "We are busy," he said, quite calmly.

Dr Stein started to help the old man to gather the food together, but Dr Pretorious aimed a kick at the old man, who scuttled away on all fours.

"No need for that," Dr Pretorious said impatiently. "I shall show you, doctor, that she lives."

The glass bowl sang under his long fingernails; he smoothed the belt of frayed red silk with tender care. He looked sidelong at Dr Stein and said, "There is a tribe in the far south of Egypt who have been metalworkers for three thousand years. They apply a fine coat of silver to ornaments of base metal by immersing the ornaments in a solution of nitrate of silver

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and connecting them to tanks containing plates of lead and zinc in salt water. Split by the two metals, the opposing essences of the salt water flow in different directions, and when they join in the ornaments draw the silver from solution. I have experimented with that process, and will experiment more, but even when I substitute salt water with acid, the flow of essences is as yet too weak for my purpose. This—" he rapped the glass bowl, which rang like a bell— "is based on a toy that their children played with, harnessing that same essence to give each other little frights. I have greatly enlarged it, and developed a way of storing the essence it generates. For this essence lives within us, too, and is sympathetic to the flow from this apparatus. By its passage through the glass the silk generates that essence, which is stored here, in this jar. Look closely if you will. It is only ordinary glass, and ordinary water, sealed by a cork, but it contains the essence of life."

"What do you want of me?"

"I have done much alone. But, doctor, we can do so much more together. Your reputation is great."

"I have the good fortune to be allowed to teach the physicians here some of the techniques I learned in Prussia. But no surgeon would operate on a corpse."

"You are too modest. I have heard the stories of the man of clay your people can make to defend themselves. I know it is based on truth. Clay cannot live, even if bathed in blood, but a champion buried in the clay of the earth might be made to live again, might he not?"

Dr Stein understood that the mountebank believed his own legerdemain. He said, "I see that you have great need of money. A man of learning would only sell books in the most desperate circumstances, but all the books in this library have gone. Perhaps your sponsors are disappointed, and do not pay what they have promised, but it is no business of mine."

Dr Pretorious said sharply, "The fancies in those books were a thousand years old. I have no need of them. And it might be said that you owe me money. Interruption of my little demonstration cost me at least twenty soldi, for there were at least that many dowagers eager to taste the revitalizing essence of life. So I think that you are obliged to help me, eh? Now watch, and wonder."

Dr Pretorious began to work the treadles of his apparatus. The sound of his labored breathing and the soft tearing sound made by the silk belt as it revolved around and around filled the long room. At last, Dr Pretorious twitched the gold wires from the top of the glass bowl so that they fell across the girl's face. In the dim light, Dr Stein saw the snap of a fat blue flame that for a moment jumped amongst the ends of the wires. The girl's whole body shuddered. Her eyes opened.

"A marvel!" Dr Pretorious said, panting from his exercise. "Each day she dies. Each night I bring her to life."

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The girl looked around at his voice. The pupils of her eyes were of different sizes. Dr Pretorious slapped her face until a faint bloom appeared on her cheeks.

"You see! She lives! Ask her a question. Anything. She has returned from death, and there is more in her head than in yours or mine. Ask!"

"I have nothing to ask," Dr Stein said.

"She knows the future. Tell him about the future," he hissed into the girl's ear.

The girl's mouth worked. Her chest heaved as if she was pumping up something inside herself, then she said in a low whisper, "It is the Jews that will be blamed."

Dr Stein said, "That's always been true."

"But that's why you're here, isn't it?"

Dr Stein met Dr Pretorious's black gaze. "How many have you killed, in your studies?"

"Oh, most of them were already dead. They gave themselves for science, just as in the ancient days young girls were sacrificed for the pagan gods."

"Those days are gone."

"Greater days are to come. You will help. I know you will. Let me show you how we will save her. You will save her, won't you?"

The girl's head was beside Dr Pretorious's. They were both looking at Dr Stein. The girl's lips moved, mumbling over two words. A cold mantle crept across Dr Stein's skin. He had picked up a knife when he had stooped to help the old man, and now, if he could, he had a use for it.

Dr Pretorious led Dr Stein to the pen where the pig snuffled in its straw. He held up a candle, and Dr Stein saw clearly, for an instant, the hand on the pig's back. Then the creature bolted into shadow.

It was a human hand, severed at the wrist and poking out of the pink skin of the pig's back as if from a sleeve. It looked alive: the nails were suffused, and the skin was as pink as the pig's skin.

"They don't last long," Dr Pretorious said. He seemed pleased by Dr Stein's shock. "Either the pig dies, or the limb begins to rot. There is some incompatibility between the two kinds of blood. I have tried giving pigs human blood before the operation, but they die even more quickly. Perhaps with your help I can perfect the process. I will perform the operation on the girl, replace her rotten foot with a healthy one. I will not have her imperfect. I will do better. I will improve her, piece by piece. I will make her a true Bride of the Sea, a wonder that all the world will worship. Will you help me, doctor? It is difficult to get bodies. Your friend is causing me a great deal of nuisance . . . but you can bring me bodies, why, almost every day. So many die in winter. A piece here, a piece there. I do not need the whole corpse. What could be simpler?"

He jumped back as Dr Stein grabbed his arm, but Dr Stein was quick-

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er, and knocked the candle into the pen. The straw was aflame in an instant, and the pig charged out as soon as Dr Stein pulled back the hurdle. It barged at Dr Pretorious as if it remembered the torments he had inflicted upon it, and knocked him down. The hand flopped to and fro on its back, as if waving.

The girl could have been asleep, but her eyes opened as soon as Dr Stein touched her cold brow. She tried to speak, but she had very little strength now, and Dr Stein had to lay his head on her cold breast to hear her mumble the two words she had mouthed to him earlier.

"Kill me."

Behind them, the fire had taken hold in the shelving and floor, casting a lurid light down the length of the room. Dr Pretorious ran to and fro, pursued by the pig. He was trying to capture the scampering mice-things which had been driven from their hiding places by the fire, but even with their staggering bipedal gait they were faster than he was. The old man ran into the room, and Dr Pretorious shouted, "Help me, you fool!"

But the old man ran past him, ran through the wall of flames that now divided the room, and jumped onto Dr Stein as he bent over the drowned girl. He was as weak as a child, but when Dr Stein tried to push him away he bit into Dr Stein's wrist and the knife fell to the floor. They reeled backwards and knocked over a jar of acid. Instantly, acrid white fumes rose up as the acid burnt into the wood floor. The old man rolled on the floor, beating at his smoking, acid-drenched costume.

Dr Stein found the knife and drew its sharp point down the length of the blue veins of the drowned girl's forearms. The blood flowed surprisingly quickly. Dr Stein stroked the girl's hair, and her eyes focused on his. For a moment it seemed as if she might say something, but with the heat of the fire beating at his back he could not stay any longer.

Dr Stein knocked out a shutter with a bench, hauled himself onto the window-ledge. As he had hoped, there was black water directly below: like all *palazzos,* this one rose straight up from the Grand Canal. Smoke rolled around him. He heard Dr Pretorious shout at him and he let himself go, and gave himself to air, and then water.

Dr Pretorious was caught at dawn the next day, as he tried to leave the city in a hired skiff. The fire set by Dr Stein had burnt out the top floor of the *palazzo,* no more, but the old man had died there. He had been the last in the line of a patrician family that had fallen on hard times: the *palazzo* and an entry in the *Libro d'Oro* was all that was left of their wealth and fame.

Henry Gorrall told Dr Stein that no mention need be made of his part in this tragedy. "Let the dead lay as they will. There's no need to disturb them with fantastic stories."

"Yes," Dr Stein said, "the dead should stay dead."

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He was lying in his own bed, recovering from a rheumatic fever brought about by the cold waters into which he had plunged on his escape. Winter sunlight pried at the shutters of the white bedroom, streaked the fresh rushes on the floor.

"It seems that Pretorious has influential friends," Gorrall said. "There won't be a trial and an execution, much as he deserves both. He's going straight to the galleys, and no doubt after a little while he will contrive, with some help, to escape. That's the way of things here. His name wasn't really Pretorious, of course. I doubt if we'll ever know where he came from. Unless he told you something of himself."

Outside the bedroom there was a clamor of voices as Dr Stein's wife welcomed in Abraham Soncino and his family, and the omelettes and other egg dishes they had brought to begin the week of mourning.

Dr Stein said, "Pretorious claimed that he was in Egypt, before he came here."

"Yes, but what adventurer was not, after the Florentines conquered it and let it go? Besides, I understand that he stole the apparatus not from any savage tribe, but from the Great Engineer of Florence himself. What else did he say? I'd know all, not for the official report, but my peace of mind."

"There aren't always answers to mysteries," Dr Stein told his friend. The dead should stay dead. Yes. He knew now that his daughter had died. He had released her memory when he had released the poor girl that Dr Pretorious had called back from the dead. Tears stood in his eyes, and Gorrall clumsily tried to comfort him, mistaking them for tears of grief. ●

ASTRONAUT BONEYARD

In the astronaut boneyard
we light star candles
and sculpt wind statues because
their memorial portraits should be
ever-moving
as we remember them
without limits.

—Wendy Rathbone

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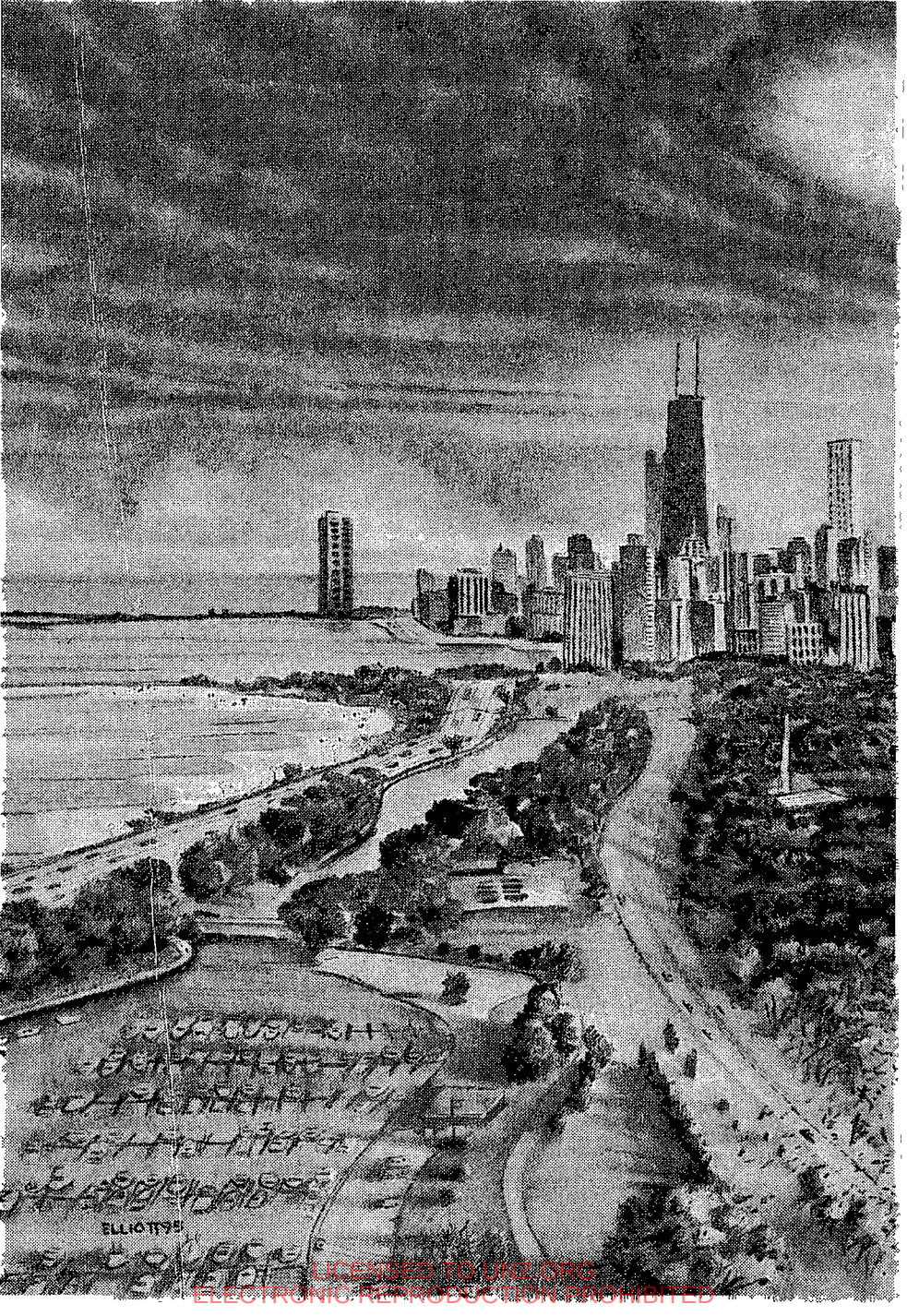

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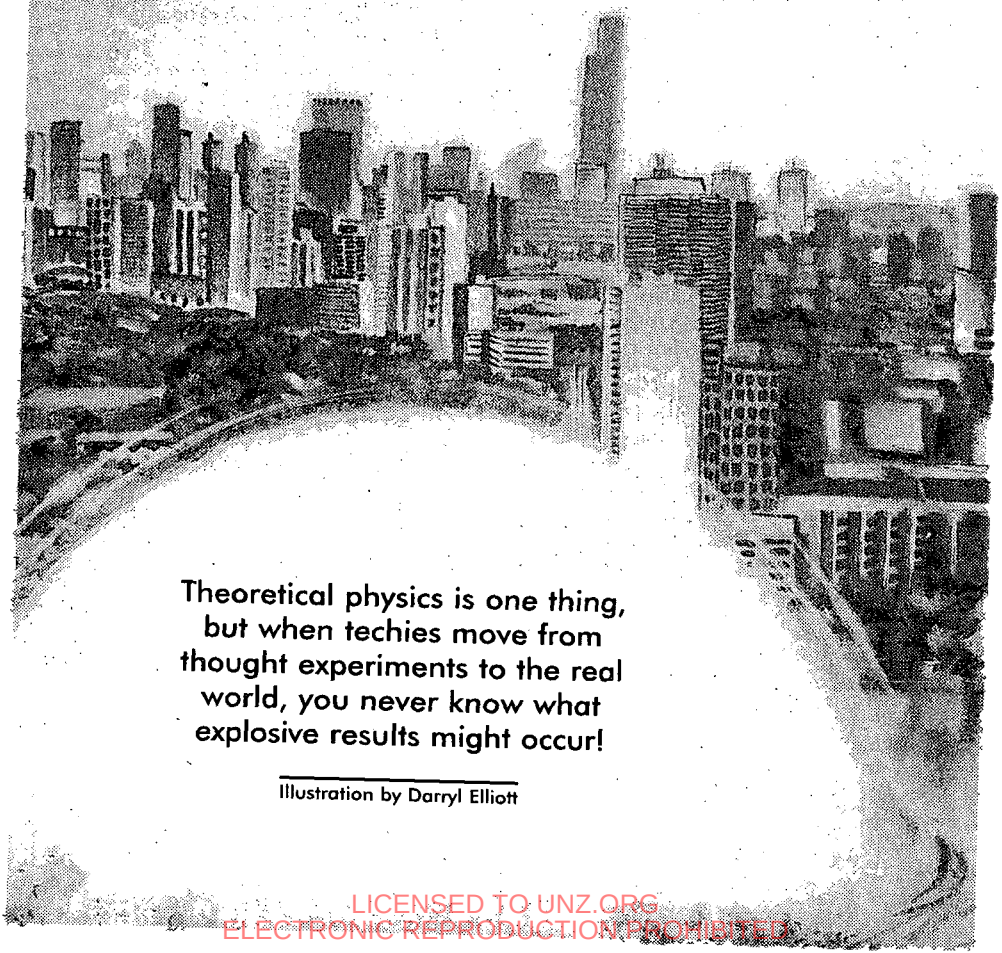

Theoretical physics is one thing, but when techies move from thought experiments to the real world, you never know what explosive results might occur!

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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The state cop was glaring at me. He was holding a flashlight as big around as a baseball bat, and he looked like he wanted to slam me right in the chops with it. I had been going to answer the suit's question with a wisecrack, but I thought better of it; my head was already pounding, and my ears were still ringing from the blast. Hell, maybe the cop actually knew one of the burned girls in the hospital. He might even be a relative; in these small college towns up in the Great Frozen North, almost anything is possible.

The suit kept on with his blather. I had already asked if I could call my attorney, or else go home, but I had been brushed off. This wasn't a criminal investigation, at least not yet. Amid all the doubletalk about National Security, the implication was, of course, that they could keep me sequestered in this mothballed air force base out in the swamps of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan until hell froze over if they felt like it, and there really wasn't a damn thing I could do about it, at least not in the short term. I felt as if I was trapped in a rerun one of those paranoid conspiracy movies from the sixties: play ball, punk, or you'll stay out here in Hangar Thirteen in the desert forever! What a way to spend your summer vacation!

I waited politely until the suit ran down into vague threats and began to repeat his set spiel. I had an idea.

"Well, sir," I said, "maybe there's a way I can help you out and still not have to flush all my constitutional rights down the commode. Let me talk to Colonel Anderson for a couple of minutes."

More raving, while I studied the drab prefab barracks walls and the fluorescent ice-cube-tray overhead lights. There was no such person, etc. This joker was either ignorant, or else lying in his teeth, but if I called him on it, I wasn't going to earn myself any brownie points.

Most treasury agents are reasonable, well-educated, and courteous. BATF enforcement seemed to get the very best and the very worst; on one hand, you had fearless operatives who could peacefully disarm a roomful of crazed drug dealers with machine guns, or patiently sniff out a terrorist bomb in a crowded airport. On the other hand, you had petty micro-minds like this guy, who could make paper shufflers in the U.S. State Department, circa 1937, look really efficient and creative by comparison. "No offense intended, sir, but I think you're mistaken. I'm sure I saw the colonel going into that conference room down the hall with the sheriff's deputies and a couple of Batf . . . er, some treasury agents. I don't know if he remembers me or not, but you could ask him if he's willing to talk to me. Give him my full name, and tell him it has to do with Cottar, as in cotter key, only with an 'a.'"

A close call. I had better learn to watch my mouth; BATF agents don't much like the nickname "Batfag" even though other agencies, even inside Treasury, often use it behind their backs.

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He kept me waiting for another ten minutes, just so I wouldn't forget who was in charge of this interrogation, and then grudgingly went off down the hall. The cop just sat there glaring at me, as if I were one of those baby-shooting crack dealers from Tampa you read about in the newspapers, going free on a legal technicality. Neither he nor the suit were wearing nametags, and I never did get their names.

It must have been some kind of security precaution; even the sheriff's deputies had taken their tags and badges off before they frog-marched me over here from the medical check at the hospital in Houghton. They were acting pissed-off too, as if they would have felt better if I'd had some arms and legs blown off, instead of just cuts and bruises and a ringing in the ears, eight hours and something after the event.

Colonel Torrey Anderson strode brusquely through the door and gave me a sharp look. He was wearing civilian clothes, but I recognized him, all right. He was a very light-skinned black man, late forties, medium build, with pale blue eyes behind steel-frame G.I. glasses.

"What's this about Cottar?" he said.

"If you want me to spell it out," I said, "It's Cottar-Ass, the Congressional Office of Tech. . . ."

"Hush your mouth!" he snapped. Clearly, he realized some minor functionary was probably routinely taping all the conversations in these makeshift interrogation rooms. "You working for them?"

"Nothing to do with all this," I said. "We met briefly a couple of years ago in Ann Arbor. I was testifying on a counterfeiting case."

"So?"

"So, I think we have a mutual acquaintance. You get these guys in suits and ties to let me talk to Congressman Mitch Carney real time, not just voicemail. If he guarantees I won't be railroaded, I'll co-operate 110 percent."

"What if he won't talk to you?"

"Then I'll talk to somebody on his staff, and then we wait for a little while. If this case is really as important as everybody seems to think it is, he'll get back to us after he's checked around."

"All right, son. I suppose it's worth a try, but we're not going to wait around all day. It's early morning now in Washington."

A few minutes later, I was on the phone with Mitch Carney's chief of staff, a woman from Hamtramck with a long Polish name I wouldn't even try to spell from just hearing it on the phone. She gave a polite, polished speech about how even though he was very busy, the congressman was *really* interested in my case, and how she was *certain* that my best course of action was to co-operate fully with the authorities. Nary a word about any guarantees. . . .

"Excuse me, ma'am, I don't want to be rude, but you haven't said a single syllable about keeping my posterior out of Leavenworth. I'm simply a

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witness, a bystander, but these people are treating me like I'm a lunatic pipe-bomber or something. Please listen very carefully: this is a code phrase Mitch told me to use in situations like this: Can you authenticate Snyder/Phillips?"

There was a long pause, some clicks and beeps, and then a new voice came on the line. "The authentication of Snyder/Phillips is Mason/Abbott; please authenticate Holmes."

"The authentication of Holmes is Hubbard." Like the other names, Holmes and Hubbard were adjacent dormitories at a Big Ten university, the congressman's alma mater.

A few minutes more of this mumbo-jumbo, and Carney himself was on the line. An aide had brought in a scrambled telephone in a fancy case, and all the cops and Treasury agents had been shooed out of the room, leaving just me and the light-skinned colonel alone with the speaker-box. If the room was still bugged, somebody reliable controlled access to the recorder.

"This had better really be important, Hawkins," Mitch said. "If you just got arrested playing with some of those high-tech Jacksons, your ass is as good as embalmed right now."

The "Jacksons" were excimer laser-engraved plates for counterfeiting twenty dollar bills from the case a few years back. I just testified before a COTTAR ASS sub-committee, accepted a very generous honorarium, and then went home and kept my mouth shut like I was supposed to. Mitch and the others knew I hadn't leaked anything to the media; the big Wall Street panic never happened, and the dollar and the yen are just about as sound as they've ever been.

"No, sir," I said. "This has nothing to do with that case. What has happened is this: a bunch of engineering students and other assorted nerds were fooling around in a state park with some kind of secret gadget they'd built. I know a few of them personally, from high school and college, and I just happened to be there this weekend."

"So?"

"So, somehow they screwed up, dropped a decimal point or something. They managed to vaporize about half of McLain State Park, themselves, and maybe fifty or so innocent tourists and campers. With something in a cigar box on a picnic table. I got burns from the flash from a mile or so down the beach."

"Oh, shit!"

"Exactly. Oh, shit. Everybody around here except the colonel has been treating me like an Iraqi spy or a lunatic basement bomber with anthrax. I know . . . er, I knew some of these people, and I think I can help with the investigation, but I don't want to spend the next twenty years in the Montana Gulag, either. I was hoping that you and the colonel could work something out."

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"I don't think you have to worry about that."

"I worry a lot, especially with nearly a hundred people either dead or missing, or lying in the hospital with flash burns. I worry when I get shanghaied out to some secret Air Force facility that was supposed to have been closed twenty years ago, and everybody is posturing and waving their 'National Security' weenies around. I know what the 'Ass' in 'Cottar Ass' stands for, and I know how you people work! I was thinking of something in writing. . . ."

Half an hour later, I was seated in a comfortable office down the hall with the colonel, some sandwiches and coffee, and a stack of file folders with mug shots right out of a *Mission: Impossible* rerun.

My precious piece of paper, signed by Carney, the colonel, and some two-star general they'd rounded up, was safely in my pocket. More to the point, a copy had been faxed to Elly Rosenberg, my lawyer in Los Angeles, and I had her acknowledgment in return.

"Okay," said the colonel, with more than a trace of sarcasm in his voice, "You've got your coffee and sandwiches; anything else, maybe a magnum of champagne and some chorus girls?"

"Strong coffee's just fine, sir. You can't expect them to stock Jolt Cola 'way out here in the boondocks. There is something else, though."

"I was afraid of that!"

"I promised to cooperate 110 percent, and now I'm doing it! First, there are some photographs that may be helpful. It would be easier if I just went out and got them myself, but I gather that the treasury people want me right here where they can keep an eye on me."

"That's putting it mildly, son; what about the photos?"

"I shot a lot of pictures this weekend. There's even a picture of the mystery device itself, if it turns out." I definitely had Anderson's full attention now! "You'll have to get somebody to go get them for me, I guess. Get my car keys from the sheriff. Have them go to the cottage on the beach where the girl and I were arrested, and find an old, blue Ford Econoline van with Florida ham radio license plates."

I gave him instructions on how to find the locked toolbox under the spare tire well. "There's an old Olympus camera body, some lenses, and three or four cassettes of 35 millimeter film, plus some loose negs, and a partially-exposed roll still in the camera. Have somebody at Cottar or at an air force lab who knows what he's doing develop the pictures. It's 3M type 9970, like they use in Hollywood, so you'll have slides, prints, and a color negative, all off the same roll."

Anderson gave me that sharp look again. "Not regular C-41 chemistry, then," he said.

"No, sir. I usually use a lab in California, or else mail it in to the 3M factory in St. Paul. There's an 800 number on the film boxes for more info."

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The colonel left to make some phone calls and expedite things. I spent an hour or so looking over the dossiers on the table, then tried to catch a short nap on a ratty old leather sofa that reeked of cigarette smoke from missions that had been flown since before I was born, in lumbering, doomsday aluminum crates that even then were older than their Cold War crews.

I awakened sometime later, feeling rotten. The ears were still ringing; how many hours now? I stared stupidly at a wristwatch-size pale spot of skin in the hot pink UV burns on my wrist. I must have slept several hours. The sheriff still had my watch and other personal effects. Had they arrested everybody near the park? If they had, where the hell were they keeping them? Where the devil was Kirsten? She had had her back to the beach when the flash came, and fortunately, I close my eyes when kissing pretty girls, so the corneas of my eyes were going to be okay. I looked at the burns on the back of my right hand and forearm. There ought to be a matching white silhouette on the small of her back, unless there had still been enough sunblock lotion on her skin. . . . My fingertips still smelled faintly of coconut oil.

A fortyish-looking woman in civilian clothes came in with a tray of food, a carton of donuts and several paper bags of other fast-food stuff. Presumably, the base mess hall was still in mothballs. She checked the big aluminum coffee urn, and left without a word.

I scratched the skin on my arms; it didn't hurt exactly, but it felt hot and itchy. The cortisone shot they gave me at the hospital was probably starting to wear off. I thought of Dick Feynman, the Nobel Prize nuclear physicist, watching the first Manhattan District bomb test at Almagordo from a few miles away. He had been confident that the only direct danger at that distance was ultraviolet, and his jeep windshield would block that safely, so he left his colleagues crouching in the bunker, and watched the beginning of the Atomic Age live from the comfort of the driver's seat. Whatever that thing in the state park had been, though, it sure as hell wasn't a nice, simple, atom bomb.

I was poking listlessly through the donuts when Anderson came in again, a sheaf of photographs under his arm, and my duffel bag over his shoulder. He set the bag down on the sofa, and spread the big, 16 x 20 inch prints out on the table with the dossiers. There was a stack a couple of inches thick, smelling of fresh chemicals.

"I thought you were bullshitting me about the pictures, Hawkins. Now I know better. I pried some of your personal stuff loose from the cops. They'll want you to sign for it eventually."

"Thanks. How'd you get these processed so quickly?"

"Got lucky. There's a retired photo-interp major runs a private lab in Rhinelander, Wisconsin. Only half an hour from here in a jump jet. Your original negatives are in Washington by now; you'll get compensation

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from Cottar if they have to be suppressed. You know how that works."

I knew. The "ASS" end of Cottar Ass was sometimes unfair and high-handed, and not above illegal dirty tricks when necessity required, but if you played ball with them, they kept their side of the bargain.

Usually.

I always wondered about some of the early cases, like the rumors about Abe Zapruder, or the guy with all those UFO photos from South America, or that nerdy high school sophomore in the Chicago suburbs who was making phosphonyl binary nerve gas from bug killer and drugstore rubbing alcohol, and testing it on neighborhood stray cats. I knew one thing for sure; those secret prison camps in Montana are for real, and I sure as hell didn't want that kind of dude ranch vacation.

The colonel had spread out a handful of the pictures on the table along with the file folders with the mug shots. From the way he was acting, there was probably a video camera concealed in the ceiling behind the lights. That was okay by me.

"While the technical staff is working on the pictures of the device, I'd appreciate it if you'd go through some of these with me, match up the pictures and the people you know."

"Sure." I shuffled through the stacks, made a few tentative matches, and then slapped down a folder. "Might as well start with this guy," I said. "I don't . . . er, I didn't know him all that well, but he was real high profile, one of the ringleaders. He's probably in a lot of these pictures."

"Hmmm . . . Guy Rattan, Michigan Tech, Class of '88. Physics major." Anderson had set down the file, and was working his way through a half-dozen of the prints. Suddenly he stopped and did a fantastic double-take, right out of an old vaudeville comic routine. "Jesus Christ!" he said. I looked at the picture and had to chuckle, despite the burned bodies in the morgue, the hospital, the pissed-off cops, and all the rest.

The picture was from last summer's annual gathering, not the current disaster. It showed the Rattan kid sitting on a bicycle, with a complete yuppie biker outfit, nylon racing shorts, streamlined crash helmet, the works. Nothing too unusual about that, except the bicycle was floating about forty feet above the ground, over a cheering crowd of rowdy college students!

Another picture, shot without the zoom lens, showed the whole rig clearly. The bicycle was hanging on nearly invisible nylon fish line from an aluminum framework. The framework, forty feet long and weighing maybe fifteen pounds, hung in turn from a slightly lopsided, transparent plastic balloon, like a toy erector set girder dangling from an over-inflated condom. An airship off the cover of *MAD Magazine,* circa 1965.

"Was this a gag, or what?"

"It was certainly a gag," I said, "but it was real enough. He never got up more than a couple of thousand feet, or much over twenty miles an

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hour top speed, but it was enough to make for a lively weekend."

"What the hell's this, some kind of rocket launcher?" The colonel was pointing to another shot, showing the homemade dirigible's pilot aiming a bazooka-like object backward over his shoulder.

"Sears leaf blower," I said. "Remember, some of these people may have been flakes and misfits socially, but they were mostly bright as hell, real engineers. That aluminum framework was a true Buckminster Fuller tensegrity mast. It may have been made out of junk lawn chairs and nylon fishline, but it was light and rigid as hell, probably twice as good for the job as a conventional dirigible frame."

"Where the hell did they get all the helium?" The colonel was shaking his head.

"I asked them that . . . Tommy Olson, Rattan's co-pilot on the one long-range flight they made, was just sitting there on the bike like Clint Eastwood, sucking on a little black cigar. A lighted cigar. '*Helium?*' he says, 'who the hell can afford helium?' They must have known what they were doing, 'cause they didn't blow themselves up, not *that* time."

The next picture showed a grinning face and lots of frizzy yellow hair. Visualize a cross between a young Art Garfunkel and Christopher Lloyd as a mad scientist in a time-machine movie. Wilhelm Van Der Kalmenbrouck, Double-E, Tech Class of '85, known universally as Cap'n Billy. A mischievous grinning face, seen through the smoke of a sputtering fuze. All these kids (I still thought of them as kids, even the ones pushing forty) were bats about explosives and pyrotechnics, but Cap'n Billy's Whiz-bangs were legendary!

A guy in air force fatigues brought in another stack of photos and a cardboard carton of papers and books, and left them on the table. The colonel wasn't stupid; he'd been scrounging around for any other photos and clues in the effects of others, any he could find that hadn't been vaporized.

I glanced through the prints as he handed them to me in bunches, trying at first to match them up with the folders. There was another good shot of Cap'n Billy, standing next to a fancy sundial on the beach at Woods Hole with some pals. I recognized a famous oceanographer who was renowned for TV specials on historic sunken ships, most recently the Japanese battleship *Yamato*. Another showed Kirsten, her Swimsuit-Issue body glorious in a conservative bikini (conservative by Florida standards, anyway), and another pretty blonde that I think had been Rattan's sister or cousin.

Another shot showed a guy with a scraggly beard and glasses talking to a slight, balding, forty-year-old with sideburns, who was holding a fuzzy white dog under his arm. "You government spook types must already have a security file on this guy, the one with the beard. He was a physicist at Fermilab, Bill Hillerman. If anyone understood the scientific

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side of the mystery device, Hillerman probably did. The DOE must have papers and computer notes of his that could help explain things.

"The man holding the dog is James Corum Naglich. He was a systems analyst for Xerox, then made a fortune writing computer books. The Charles Manson look-alike behind them is Elwyn Henry 'OZ' Oswald, probably the most notorious hacker and phone phreak since Captain Crunch. His specialty was hacking the commercial and marine teletype networks."

Another handful of pictures was a real mixed bag, and I filled in Anderson as best I could. There was a three-hundred-pound hippie who lived in a geodesic dome up in the woods in Canada and wrote science-fiction stories about tiny lizards that could teleport and steal electronics parts. Mike Royce, another Chicago hacker type, was there with his wife; they both looked about fifteen years old.

Then there were a couple of really strange ones, like the cartoonist dressed as an Italian priest, but with a six-gun strapped low on his thigh, a real pro gunfighter rig. He drew underground adult comics about oversexed cat-women in heavy leather and barbarian princesses with big boobs getting it on with horny panther men and small groups of well-hung centaurs, stuff like that. There was an Italian kid who made expensive toy rayguns with real lasers in them for rich movie fans, and the small-time Hollywood actor, "Doc" Jekyll, who also worked as a consultant in pyrotechnics and special effects.

Several connecting threads wove their way through the otherwise amorphous group, binding it together like a big, sloppy, FORTH program. One was ham radio and computers; another was flying, especially antique warbirds, balloons, and zeppelins. Above all was a fascination for things that blow up *real good.*

I skimmed through more than a dozen less-familiar younger faces, all students from nearby Michigan Tech. They were mostly double-E's or physics rats, though I spotted a nurse and a couple of English majors. There was a chubby, pretty, Oriental woman with a two-year-old kid on her hip. Her name had been Miki something-or-other, and she had been a UNIX programmer for the phone company in Minneapolis. I felt bad about the little kids, especially the burned ones in the hospital. The ones closer to ground zero probably never felt a thing.

The colonel was looking over my shoulder at the file folders. I had marked a number of them with a penciled "HB"; he asked about it.

"Harvey's Basement," I said. "It was a hangout for a bunch of us back in high school. An old guy who was a radar technician on the lake freighters opened up his basement workshop and ham shack to a bunch of teenage overachievers who otherwise would probably have electrocuted themselves or blown their hands off building pipe bombs."

"If you punks have been hanging out together since high school, maybe

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you can help translate some of the memoirs," the colonel said. He handed me some sheets of fanfold computer paper. It was a series of E-mail messages from a DOE network bulletin board. Some security hack had blacked out the addresses with a magic marker.

I turned over the pages, and held the cheap paper up to the fluorescent lights. I read off the deleted addresses to Anderson: a USENET node in Aurora, Illinois, a VAX belonging to a utility company in Long Beach, California, and another address that took me a minute to identify. Finally, I pulled a picture from the pile and laid it on the table next to the papers.

A half dozen smirking techies with toy laser pistols and VHF walkie-talkies were posing with a home brew trash-can robot in front of a monstrous factory building that seemed to go clear to the horizon. "I got this one, but it took a minute," I said. "That address is the Y-12 building in Oak Ridge. That's where they enrich uranium hexafluoride by . . ."

"I already know that, smartass." I couldn't tell if the colonel was grinning or frowning. "What I need is a guide to the private jargon in the messages themselves."

"I could try to put together a glossary," I said, "though I don't think we have enough time for me to be really thorough. We'd be here the rest of the summer; here's a good example: This guy mentions '146.94 Mega-Hershies.' This is not a joke about chocolate."

"So?"

"So, back in the sixties there was a flight of TV commercials for Hertz car rentals that showed a guy in a suit with a briefcase being magically dropped through the air to land in a speeding convertible. The slogan was 'Let Hertz put you in the driver's seat.' Very catchy."

"I remember. But what. . . ?"

"I'm getting to it. The point is, the phrase caught on. Later, when the Viet Nam draft was just getting going, there was a reactionary old geezer running the Selective Services named General Hershey."

"I met him once."

"It figures. Anyway, at winter carnival at Tech, there was a snow statue that won an award for most humorous. It showed a graduate in cap and gown, diploma in hand, being dropped into a waiting army tank. The slogan was, 'Let Hershey put you in the driver's seat!' "

"But . . ."

"That very same year, the official ITU nomenclature for radio frequencies went from 'kilocycles' to 'kiloHertz,' and so on, in honor of the German physicist. The Hertz-Hershey connection was perfectly natural usage for techies who had been there. There are hundreds of expressions like that, mixed in with ham and computer slang, science fiction jargon, World War II aviation terms, and a lot more that's so obscure even old timers like me don't know the exact reference, though we usually under-

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stand it in context."

"Great."

"Yeah. 'A cold 807,' that's easy. '807' is ham radio slang for beer, after an antique radio tube that looked sort of like a beer bottle."

"How about these?" Anderson was pointing to some more words highlighted in yellow marker.

"Okay. 'Weaselrats' are mythical science fantasy creatures, sort of like gremlins, only they spy on inventors and steal their secrets. 'Mermaids' is frat-house slang for nymphomaniacs, or at least sexually active young women.

"The 'command' expressions, I'm not too sure about. It could be a reference to World War II surplus aircraft radios that were called 'command sets,' or maybe PC-DOS software. The stuff about 'pessimizing compilers,' is definitely a computer joke; I haven't a clue about 'bowling butter,' . . . care to guess?"

"Damn if I know." The colonel actually cracked a smile. "Sounds kinky."

"Anyway, the gist of all this, inside jokes aside, is that these guys had done some private research connected somehow with the Esaki tunnel diode effect, had asked for funding through legitimate sources, and had either been put on hold or refused outright. When this Johanssen guy at Sandia says he's afraid of being 'weaselratted,' he means he's worried that some other researchers might make a related discovery, get funding, and eventually publish and get credit for a development that could turn out to be very important."

"A nasty thought just occurred." Anderson tasted his coffee, cold by this time, and grimaced. "You don't suppose Cottar would have blown all these people up just to suppress whatever it was they were working on?"

"I doubt it, sir," I said. "Not their style. They hate publicity; if somebody was onto something really dangerous, they'd more likely bribe or blackmail him or his boss, maybe get them really generous funding to work on something else. Oh, if somebody wouldn't play ball, they might sabotage his or her career with political dirty tricks or ridicule. Remember cold fusion? Anyway, if they'd known about this, which I doubt, I can't see them nuking a bunch of innocent people in a state park. In an extreme case, they might try to get a really dangerous crackpot locked up in a mental ward, or tied up in court with the IRS, something like that."

"Maybe they didn't figure these nerds would be reckless enough to test their widget in a populated area. 'Way out in the desert somewhere, you get a big flash, and the problem is solved!"

"Nope, I just don't think so."

I went over the rest of the dossiers with Anderson before a short lunch break. I guess it was lunch; I'd lost track of the time outside.

It had sure been a bad weekend for physics majors, like Doug, Kurt,

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Arnie, and the rest of those guys from AT&T . . . Mickey Daniels was technically a civilian physicist for the Navy, though mostly he did mechanical engineering on solid fuel grains at Indian Head Arsenal.

Johnny Ebb, ex-Navy NCO and hard-core Nuc instructor at Idaho Falls, went back and got a degree at Northwestern after he got out. He'd have been a hell of a lot safer at his old job, back on the Enterprise. Marie Conolly had been a cute, redheaded microwave specialist for some Canadian satellite company; her older cousin, Rose, had something to do with SigGraph in Minneapolis, but they both also taught physics classes. All that brain power, wasted in a flash!

I got a clean change of clothes, some soap, and a Bic razor out of my duffel, and got a quick shower and shave in a chilly concrete bay down the hall. All the time, there was a Batfag in a suit and an NCO with a sidearm keeping an eye on me.

When I got back, there were two familiar faces in the room, as well as more brass in civilian clothes. Jimmy Traverse and Michael D. Lansing were sitting there in tropic-weight suits, California tans, and expensive aviator sunglasses; I wasn't the only surviving techie!

Traverse used to teach physics at Michigan State, then he did some work for the military side of NASA at Vandenberg, and then one of those big conservative think tanks. Mike is an information systems analyst, i.e., high-tech librarian. Both of them were apparently now on loan to Cottar. Traverse looks like the TV commentator, Morton Kondrache. Lansing looks like an eighteen-year-old David Eisenhower on benzedrine.

"Hawkins, you old lecher!" Both of them were smiling, despite the gravity of the situation. We did the whole bit with the secret handshake, though we got frowns and puzzled stares from all the suits in the room.

Traverse looks the yuppie right-wing consultant now, but I still remembered when he nearly got expelled from high school for trying to make diamonds from graphite in an oil drum full of water with shaped explosive charges. He actually managed to salvage half a spoonful of low-grade industrial diamonds, though you needed a microscope to see them, and instead of being thrown out on his butt, he got a full ride scholarship at Case.

The last time I had seen Lansing, he had been wearing grubby chinos and a "Nuke The Gay Whales for Jesus!" T-shirt, and had been frantically trying to get some Disk-Packs back on-line at Pasadena for one of the Magellan dumps. With a couple of shots of Scotch in him, he could do an absolutely devastating Carl Sagan impersonation.

Both men knew Hillerman and Mitch Carney from grad school, and it turned out Traverse was going to be the senior civilian investigator, after the congressman himself. I quit worrying so much about the Montana Gulag.

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They didn't waste much time. Ten or fifteen minutes later, we were all gathered in a briefing room with maps and a big projection screen on the wall. Travese started the meeting off by reminding everybody about the security oaths they had all signed. Then he said the magic words, calling this session of the Congressional Office of Technology Threat Assessment, Research, and Suppression Strategy to order.

First off, he had them run a slide showing some of the burned bodies to underscore the seriousness of the situation; this was not a routine session on computer viruses or still another suppressed one hundred M.P.G. automotive fuel injector.

Then they projected a three-dimensional sketch of the new crater between the lake and the highway, almost perfectly circular, and a bit more than a quarter mile across. It was somewhat elliptical in cross section, about five hundred feet deep at the center, as if a giant bowl of rock and soil had been magically scooped out of McLain State Park, and carried away by some Brobdingnagian alien child with a Jell-O mold.

The rim of the crater overlapped the shore of Superior for a short distance, perhaps a hundred feet or so, so the crater was now filled with water at 58 degrees Fahrenheit, this being the first week in August.

There was blast damage, of course, but not nearly as much as you'd expect from a crater that size. No radioactivity at all, and, despite the widespread UV burns, relatively few thermal effects. Most of the serious burn injuries had apparently come from secondary fires, such as exploding propane tanks and gasoline camp stoves.

That was the cover story to the press so far, that a big propane tank had leaked hundreds of gallons of LP gas, and that the resulting fuel-air explosion had leveled the park. Aircraft were being kept away, and a snooping TV reporter couldn't tell from the air how deep the water in that crater was, even if he did manage a peek through a long lens.

So what the hell had the mystery device been? It sure as hell wasn't a bomb. . . .

The slides I had shot of the experiment were up next. They had done a beautiful job of enhancing the pictures for contrast and edge-effects. A real CADD expert had done a set of complete engineering drawings from the slides, showing the details much more clearly than the photos themselves.

The central part of the gadget was a silver-plated metal box or cavity, about ten inches square and four deep. Inside the box on the bottom surface was a hockey-puck sized shallow metal cup, also silver-plated, with a jar-lid-sized disk of material centered in the bottom.

There was a hole in the top cover of the box, insulated with an inch-thick washer of Teflon, and a silver-plated metal shaft thick enough to have held flashlight batteries that fitted the big washer snugly, and extended down into the cavity to touch the surface of the disk, sort of like a

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welding electrode. There were some big magnets on the outside of the box, with thumbscrews for adjusting their position precisely.

Traverse went over the description of the box, answered a couple of pointless questions about radiation, and then asked me to get up to the speaker's stand. I complied, not too sure about what was expected. Traverse handed me a pointer, a fancy laser gadget tricked up to resemble a ball point pen.

"Fortunately, the man who took these photos survived, and is here now." Traverse patted me on the back and gave me a little shove toward the screen. "Tommy Hawkins will be happy to try and answer your questions, but I'll ask you to remember that he just took the photos; he didn't build the device."

"Thanks, Dr. Traverse," I said. "I'll repeat that: I have absolutely no idea what that gizmo was, nor what the hell they expected it to accomplish." I stood there for a few seconds, feeling foolish. No preliminary questions.

I took a deep breath, and then continued. "I noticed a couple of things when I photographed the device that aren't clear from the illustrations. I shot the photos on a picnic table, but the device was intended to be mounted on a piece of metal pipe." I handed a slide to Traverse, and he stuck it in a carousel himself.

The picture showed a row of big, black pipes all sticking out of the ground at the same angle, like ribs of a subterranean fossil whale. In the foreground, a group of techies was posing with the Italian kid behind a complicated and bizarre piece of machinery.

"First, you'll notice the rows of schedule 70 ABS plastic pipes sticking out of the ground. Those are 8-inch mortars for the illegal fireworks show they gave at the park every summer. Nothing there you wouldn't find in any small town Fourth of July show, only homemade. What I'm pointing out," (I clicked on the laser gadget and pointed), "is this other metal pipe that comes straight up out of the ground about three feet, a little off to the right, here. This was an old well, left from before the park switched over to a central water system."

"How deep?" A woman's voice from behind the slide projectors.

"I'm not sure. The water table would be somewhere near lake level, and the park is on an overlooking bluff. At least forty or fifty feet, anyway. I think the idea was to have a good, low-impedance ground connection, but I have no idea why that was important."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, ma'am. You can't see it in the photo, but there was a brass fitting on the back side of the box, and a hose that went to a gas cylinder of some kind. If I had to guess, I'd suppose that it was dry nitrogen under pressure to protect the gizmo from moisture. It could have been something more exotic, though, I couldn't say."

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"What's the machine in the picture?"

"Nothing to do with all this, ma'am."

"Answer the question, Hawkins," This last from Anderson.

"Yessir . . . ma'am, it was a home-brew Gatling gun for shooting golf balls."

"*Golf balls?*"

"Yes, ma'am. It shot regular golf balls at about 240 rounds per minute, with a muzzle velocity of 1,230 feet per second."

"Whatever for?"

"Partly for the technical challenge; there was a wager involving a keg of beer and a case of Japanese squid jerky that you couldn't build a rapid-fire cannon that could get a golf ball to go supersonic without the ball coming apart, at least not at a sustained rate of fire . . . partly as a prank. These people loved practical jokes."

"But *golf* balls . . ."

"Remember the Mitsubishi Pro-Am Florida Classic last year, with all those millionaire foreign businessmen teamed-up with famous golf pros?"

"No."

"Well, it started raining golf balls all over the course, and they had to cancel out. They wore themselves out looking for a smartass in an airplane. It was actually three techies hiding in the woods a half-mile away with this gadget hooked up to a fifty-five gallon drum of used golf balls. Nobody was seriously hurt; broke a few windows, I guess. Damn near shot down the Goodyear Blimp, *Mayflower*. Nothing to do with all this, except to illustrate their psychological mindset."

"Which was?"

"A single-minded, almost monomaniacal interest in a technical challenge, and a rather sophomoric disregard for legal technicalities, sometimes including commonsense safety precautions."

We got off on a tangent for a few minutes, and they all questioned me about the techies' scofflaw tendencies. I was able to give them plenty of examples, with pictures, including the hydrogen bike dirigible, Hillerman's Stealth Plymouth with the carbon-foam body and radar-jamming ECM equipment, the Wadsworth Hall keg cannon, the Harvey's Basement "ultralight" airplane built out of plywood, cement blocks, and two-by-fours with a Buick V-8 engine and a crew of six, and model-rocket horror stories aplenty, ending with a photo of the realistic full-size model of a Patriot missile that nearly got them arrested at a Tampa air show.

"But what's the *point* of all this?"

"Two things, ma'am, besides the psychology: Model rockets figure in this somehow; I don't have a photo of it, but there was a good-size rocket on a launching stand near the mystery gadget, and big coils of light wire laid out flat on the ground, like cordage for a coast guard line-throwing gun. I'm not sure why. Also, there were lots of scientific instruments set

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up, movie cameras, magnetometers, things like that, but they were all well back, maybe a hundred feet or so, and don't show in these photos. I think Hillerman and his pals thought that would be a safe distance."

"What do you think?"

"I think they were expecting something impressive, maybe a pretty spectacular flash, but orders of magnitude less destructive than what they got. They were a little reckless sometimes, but not suicidally insane."

Lansing got up, and came over to the screen. "If you don't mind, I can show you a piece of film that may convey a feeling for what Mr. Hawkins means." I nodded, and handed him the pointer.

They blanked the still slides, and began running the film, fireworks footage, but at a weird angle.

"This was filmed during the group's little get-together at the same park two summers ago. It's Super-8 film shot by a tourist aboard an airliner passing overhead. The odd angle effect is because we're looking *down* on the tops of the fireworks air bursts from maybe eight or ten thousand feet overhead, and a little off to the side on the approach to the Houghton airport."

The film ran for a few seconds. Lansing continued, "Just like Mr. Hawkins said, regular Fourth of July stuff. . . . Now watch this!"

Suddenly, a tremendous flash blanked the screen. After a second or two, the automatic aperture on the little camera had adjusted, and you could see an intense, blinding flare in the water just off the beach. You could see pine trees casting razor-sharp shadows, miles away, and intense reflections projected on the clouds, thunderheads that were rapidly closing in on the park.

I remembered that thunderstorm. I had just met Kirsten that week, and we were running for the shelter of her uncle's cabin down the beach from the park, where it was warm and dry, with a fire in the fireplace and hot pizza in the oven. To hell with squid jerky! Three times out of four, at these Berserker Weekends it rains, with tight, violent little thunder squalls rolling in off Lake Superior.

"What the hell was that?" The flare was still burning on the screen, and clouds of steam were rising from the shallow water off the beach. Suddenly the screen went white and stayed that way; the film in the airborne tourist's camera had run out.

"That, ladies and gentlemen," I said, "was one of Cap'n Billy's whizbangs, just a couple of hundred pounds of magnesium scrap metal, some oil drums welded together, a thermite grenade, and a few sticks of dynamite. The residuals were still burning on the bottom, under maybe ten feet of cold water when the film ran out! I think that's the kind of effect the techies were hoping for with their new gadget; something spectacular, but not too dangerous if you stayed back a safe distance."

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"Anything else, Mr. Hawkins?" Anderson sounded impatient.

"Just a couple of things. I can't help wondering, with the layout of the rocket, the wire, the mystery gadget, and low-impedance ground connection, if the whole thing wasn't intended to function as a sort of lightning rod; you launch the rocket, trailing a wire, right into a thunderstorm, and you get a terrific induction surge current from any nearby lightning, maybe even a direct strike. Sort of a high-tech update on Ben Franklin and the kite. Presumably the disk of material and the surplus radar magnets and so forth were expected to do something interesting when the current hit them, but I don't know exactly what.

"The other thing that I wonder about is what happened to all those thousands of tons of rock and dirt that used to be where the crater is now?"

"Vaporized, of course."

"I just don't think so. You'd have a plume of dust, rubble, and fallout clear to Chicago by now, and I haven't seen any signs of that. That's a hell of a lot of material; it had to go *someplace!*"

"Anything more?"

"Just an impression, but maybe it's something you can check. When I heard that explosion, a mile or so down the beach, it didn't *sound* right! I used to throw old TV picture tubes off a cliff at the city dump when I was a kid, and listen to the implosion. The sound is different!

"I think maybe you'll find that it *was* an implosion, that the big bang was caused by air rushing *in* to fill a vacuum left after all that stuff in the crater disappeared. Find out where all the rocks and dirt went, and you'll have a handle on figuring out what really happened. Thank you!" I handed Traverse back his pointer, and started to sit down.

"What about the rest of the people? I mean, if they weren't just blown to bits . . ."

I stopped, and turned to face the woman across the table full of projectors. I still couldn't see her well, just an impression of a schoolmarm hairdo, and glasses. "Ma'am, I just don't have enough information to answer that. I guess the important thing to remember is something that's easy to forget: this thing, whatever it is, *isn't* a bomb. I know, I got flashed pretty good by UV, a long ways down the beach, so did some other people. If that energy was coming from the immediate vicinity of the device, then it seems logical to assume that people standing much closer to the device would have received really terrible burns, inverse square law, and all. If, on the other hand, all the radiant energy came from hot, ionized air molecules at the interface around the perimeter of the volume that disappeared, people standing near the device might have been almost as far away as I was, and people standing near the perimeter would have been the ones zapped."

"How about other radiation?"

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"Absolutely no residual radiation of any kind."

"Gamma rays or hard X-rays wouldn't have left residuals."

"I realize that. There's other evidence, medical reports on the survivors, plus the fact that photographic film recovered from the vicinity shows no signs of fogging."

"Then some of them could have survived. . . ?"

"I don't want to raise any false hopes. . . . Our discussion of the initial blast now may be completely irrelevant. You've got this big, oblate volume centered on the machine, with the semi-major axis parallel to the ground, and the semi-minor vertical in the center, with a perimeter that is slightly irregular and chaotic. Maybe everything inside that volume of space was already gone elsewhere by the time the flash and the blast developed. We haven't established the timing yet, and that's pretty important."

Lansing was up next, with a short profile on Hillerman. His most recent project for the DOE had involved stochastic precooling and containment of tiny amounts of antimatter at Batavia. This raised a firestorm of dumb technical questions from Cottar lawyers who apparently got most of their scientific background from TV shows and Mutant Creature comic books. At least the Schoolmarm Lady had known the difference between an X-ray and a neutron!

Lansing shouted this down, and Traverse and the others backed him up. Even had Hillerman managed to capture, stabilize, and somehow transport an entire year of the lab's production of antiprotons up to the park, it wouldn't have amounted to a couple of radioactive bee farts, compared with the effects that we were now trying to explain.

More interesting were some indications of unofficial work with electron tunneling at the boundaries of semiconductor junctions. Apparently, Hillerman had stumbled on something new, a class of PN junctions that did weird things when subjected to very large surge currents.

Bill had always had an almost intuitive relationship with semiconductors. When his pals in high school had been rebuilding carburetors and trying to get to third base on dates with cheerleaders, he was winning science-fair awards, building bipolar transistors and solar cells from scratch, melting and refining his own silicon, the whole bit.

He had kept a detailed journal recently on his VAX at work, but the files were all encrypted with one of those trap-door mathematical ciphers, and nobody had cracked it yet. NSA was probably working on it, if Cottar trusted anybody at NSA. There was a quiet search afoot nation-wide for any surviving techies or other colleagues he might have given a copy of the key to, or even just *en claire* copies of some of the files. Maybe they'd get lucky. . . .

Lansing had another tantalizing tidbit of information. Last spring, Hillerman, Naglich, and a couple of other techies from the Southwest had

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driven down into Mexico, and had stopped to scrounge around in an industrial scrapyard near Monterey. They had crossed back into the U.S. at Juarez, and had declared to U.S. Customs a mixed lot of surplus electronics gear, tools, and a sealed container containing a half kilogram of metallic thallium.

"What the hell did they want thallium for?" The woman's voice again; I still hadn't seen her face clearly.

"I have no idea," Lansing said. "The man at the Monterey scrapyard thought they probably wanted to make poison bullets for shooting coyotes. Maybe they did; we have no direct proof it had a damn thing to do with this project. Maybe it was something completely unrelated, like the golf ball cannon."

The arguments raged for almost another hour, and then we took a short dinner break in a recreation room in an adjacent building; more fast food stuff, but a better selection this time. I scarfed down a couple of Whoppers, then got Lansing aside and asked him if there were any chance I could see Kirsten. He thought not until morning, if then. She was still under observation at the hospital. Her step-dad, a retired metallurgy prof from Purdue, was raising hell, and calling his congressman up long distance every half hour. He'd tried to reach me, too, but had been getting the standard Cottar run-around.

What the hell time was it, anyway? It was dark out, but the cloud cover obscured any glance at the stars, and the sheriff still had my watch. I avoided the Schoolmarm Lady, who was expensively dressed, and looked like a university department chairman or head buyer for an upscale department store. She hadn't gotten to the really tough part, namely what happened to the techies inside that bowl of rock when they got to wherever it was going.

Assuming the atoms of mass inside the bowl were not just dispersed all over the universe, in which case all bets were off, there were three possible modes of arrival, none of them terribly encouraging:

Case one assumed that the rock and inhabitants arrived someplace more or less like the place they'd left, with the surface of the ground roughly even with or below their surroundings—two huge masses of solid rock trying to occupy the same space, outcome not good. Even though matter is mostly empty space with a few particles whizzing about, all those nuclear binding forces, charges, and so on you read about in physics books are *real*, not just mathematical abstractions. The result would almost certainly be excess heat and a horrendous explosion, with possible nuclear effects and weird isotopes forming as assorted nuclei were scrunched together. Even if the force field or whatever protected the people inside from the initial blast, they'd most likely be dropped into a blazing crater, subject to intense seismic shock and who knows what else. Landing in water or glacier ice would be just about as bad; along with

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everything else, you'd have hot, ionized steam, maybe radioactive as well.

Case two, if they came through on the other side at an altitude of fifty thousand feet or out in space someplace, you wouldn't get the huge explosion, though there might be enough air molecules around for a fairly serious shock wave, but then any survivors would probably suffocate for lack of air, or be killed when the rock crash-landed.

Case three, the *optimistic* scenario, was narrowly wedged between the other two disastrous cases. If the whole thing held together and reappeared completely above ground, but not so high up that lack of atmosphere or the crash landing killed everybody, it might offer a slim chance of survival. Even a slight overlap with the ground might not be disastrous; the people in the center of the park would be shielded by several hundred yards of solid rock from effects underneath; a short fall into water or a swamp might cushion the impact. But *where?*

It was like those corny pulp time-machine stories I remembered fondly from my childhood, with bozos blithely zipping back to last year to play the stock market or back to prehistoric Kansas to hunt dinosaurs. The Earth is moving around the solar system, and the *solar system* is moving, too. What's your frame of reference? Even if your mythical time-machine stays put relative to the center of gravity of the Earth, so you don't have to worry about being dumped in space, the *continents* move . . . not just plate tectonics; you have to worry about the vertical movement, too: continental isostacy. North America floats, just like a big iceberg. Under Pleistocene glaciers, the continent sank hundreds of feet; now the glaciers had retreated, the whole works was bobbing up again, very slowly, say a foot every hundred years. That bluff at the park overlooking Lake Superior used to be the shoreline.

After the break, Traverse read a summary of notes that the DOE snooper teams had come up with, tantalizing bits and pieces of Hillerman's and Johannsen's notes that had been left unencrypted.

There were partial notes of an experiment with a sample of some unlikely semiconducting material (graphite? galena? gallium. . . ? key information was missing) doped with neodymium and arsenic. It would soak up thousands of joules of energy, and only give back a fraction of it as heat or emitted photons; where the hell had the *rest* of the power gone? To some other universe, like that fat hippie's teleporting lizards?

More to the point, where had the millions of kilos of rock that used to be the middle of McLain State Park gone? Where was Miki and her kid, or whatever was left of them? Not to mention Cap'n Billy, James Corum Naglich and his fuzzy little white dog, and all the rest? The meeting adjourned for the night, and I tried to catch some sleep on the leather ready-room couch.

Normally, I don't remember dreams, except for occasional bits of sophomoric erotica. This time, I slept only fitfully, and my dreams were sur-

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real and strange. Two images were still with me when I woke: one was right out of one of those Old Testament toga-and-gladiator movies—a shabby column of techies was marching along, tugging on a hawser. They were dragging a fiendishly complicated siege engine, all rattling chains and creaking wooden cogwheels.

The machine was connected to a Godzilla-size rubber band, thick and greasy as a slave girl's thigh, that stretched to the horizon, humming with tension. As the techies heaved and strained in their harnesses, the guards swung whips and rubber truncheons. The cogwheels revolved, and the band stretched tighter and tighter toward the breaking point.

The other persistent vision was the same battered and burned gang of survivors, but this time they were freezing, huddling around a guttering campfire on a gigantic saucer of rock that was falling through space. My last glimpse was from an overhead viewpoint, as the whole impossible thing fell toward a crash landing on some planet, with the exaggerated perspective you get when the Coyote falls off a cliff in a Road Runner cartoon.

Subconscious wishful thinking, all of it; I doubted that there were any surviving fragments of techie left bigger than a scorched DNA molecule. Still, the images haunted me as I hurriedly grabbed stale donuts and coffee for the morning session in the briefing room. I mentioned the apparition to Traverse. He blanched, and spilled his coffee.

"Christ on a Crutch!" he swore, and almost ran from the room with the colonel behind him. I buttonholed Lansing, and asked again about Kirsten.

"Oh, she's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yeah. Her stepfather showed up with a court order and a couple of armed U.S. Marshals, and took her back to Indiana. He had newspaper reporters with him, too, and he was *really* pissed!"

I grinned to myself. Good old Jack! He was the sort of citizen that Cottar usually wanted to avoid at almost any cost.

"He was looking for you, too, but Cottar got the state cops to feed him some kind of story."

Great. . . . Back inside, I blundered into a raging math argument. Traverse, the colonel, and a couple of big shots from DOE had covered the screen with equations from an overhead projector, and sounded like they'd be duking it out in the parking lot any time, now.

Traverse pointed at me, suddenly, and shouted, "You, Hawkins, get over here and explain that dream!"

What the hell? I mean, I only know one calculus joke, the old bit about "integral D cabin over cabin." I got C-minuses in high school trig, for crissakes! I gave everyone a quick recap of my goofy dreams, even the background music this time; the "falling through space" stuff had been ac-

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companied by the spooky parts of Wagner's "Flying Dutchman" theme. . . .

"You see?" A harmless-looking old fart with a movie psychiatrist accent had grabbed me by the arm. "His *subconscious* understands, even if he has not consciously the expression solved!"

"Perhaps, Dr. Soltau—like Edison's thinking naps; you may be right, but this doesn't tell us the *time* of the return. . . ."

Apparently, they'd cracked Hillerman's cipher, or found the password written down somewhere. "Excuse me," I said. Traverse held up his hand like a referee, and the shouting died down.

"Yes, Tommy?"

"I'm just a simple technical writer, not a physicist, and much of this is beyond me." I waved at the wall of equations. "Does this mean you've located the missing mass, and it's coming *back?*"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. If this is correct, then it is self-evident. . . ." Soltau rambled off into gobbledygook, but a few words like "dimensional symmetry" and "conservation of energy" came through.

"Have you gotten through to the Army Corps of Engineers yet?"

Several people laughed. One muttered, "*Those* jokers. . . ."

"What is it, Tommy?" Traverse wasn't laughing, just looking tolerant.

"Look, you've got I-don't-know-how-many thousand tons of nice, dense pre-Cambrian rock disappearing all at once. One millisecond later you have an empty crater, mostly vacuum, and following that, the implosion. Now it's gonna come slamming back from someplace, you're not sure exactly when, right?"

"Well, more or less. . . ."

"Yeah, only the crater's not *empty* anymore! That volume is now *occupied,* mostly, with nice, cold, incompressible water!"

Stunned silence.

I continued, "If I were in charge of this outfit, which Korbuhl-bepraised, I'm not; I'd get the Corps of Engineers to throw a cofferdam across the crater rim along the lake, and pump that water out with a big dredge or something. *Fast.* They've got the equipment. And I'd evacuate the park, hell, I'd evacuate the whole Upper Peninsula and maybe northern Wisconsin, too. Talk about your dinosaur-killer asteroids! Kwajalein Island in the Pacific might be safe. That's where I'm going, the minute you let me go! Or maybe Melbourne."

Actually, I didn't go to Australia; I went back to California with Traverse and Lansing instead. We have a support group now: husbands, wives, kids, parents, just former friends. It helps a lot.

The Corps of Engineers pulled it off. Their big dredge pipe was just sucking up the puddles in the bottom of the crater when the rock came back, so instead of like maybe fifty H-bombs and a new inland sea, we got a Richter 5.4 tremor and some steam. The blast killed an Army captain

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and a national guard spc.4 who were too close, but it spared thousands.

It was case three, sort of: they found six shallow graves around the old well with the melted gadget welded to it, and a metal toolbox chained to the charred stump of a pine tree with messages and photographs, Cap'n Billy's diary, and passwords to all the secret computer files and junction doping data, plus some instrument readings from the initial lightning strike.

That means sixty-two living survivors, including women and children. Out there, somewhere. Or some*when,* if you believe in time-machines. They didn't come back on the rock, because they figured the crater would be full of water, and this time they *would* be vaporized! They had a helluva time getting everybody down off the rock on a makeshift rope ladder and through the smoking rubble field to safety, with half of them temporarily blinded and everybody's eardrums ruptured by the blast. One of the Polaroid photos shows the night sky over their makeshift camp. It's driving the astronomy people crazy!

We're going back to McLain State Park next summer, Kirsten and I, partly for the memorial service, but that's not the only reason. You know what a Conex is? A Conex is a big, indestructible metal crate the Pentagon ships stuff in, stuff that has to survive an air drop without parachutes. The support group has leaned on the DOE and Cottar, hard. We've got some funding, and the technology is coming along. We're years from a round-trip rescue, if ever. But we've got that Conex, stuffed with tools, food, vitamins, a microfiche library, and medical supplies.

And we're taking an improved cavity, connected to the mother of all laser storage capacitors. All those kilofarads! It weighs thirty tons, but it's much easier to calibrate than a lightning bolt!

It should be *great!* ●

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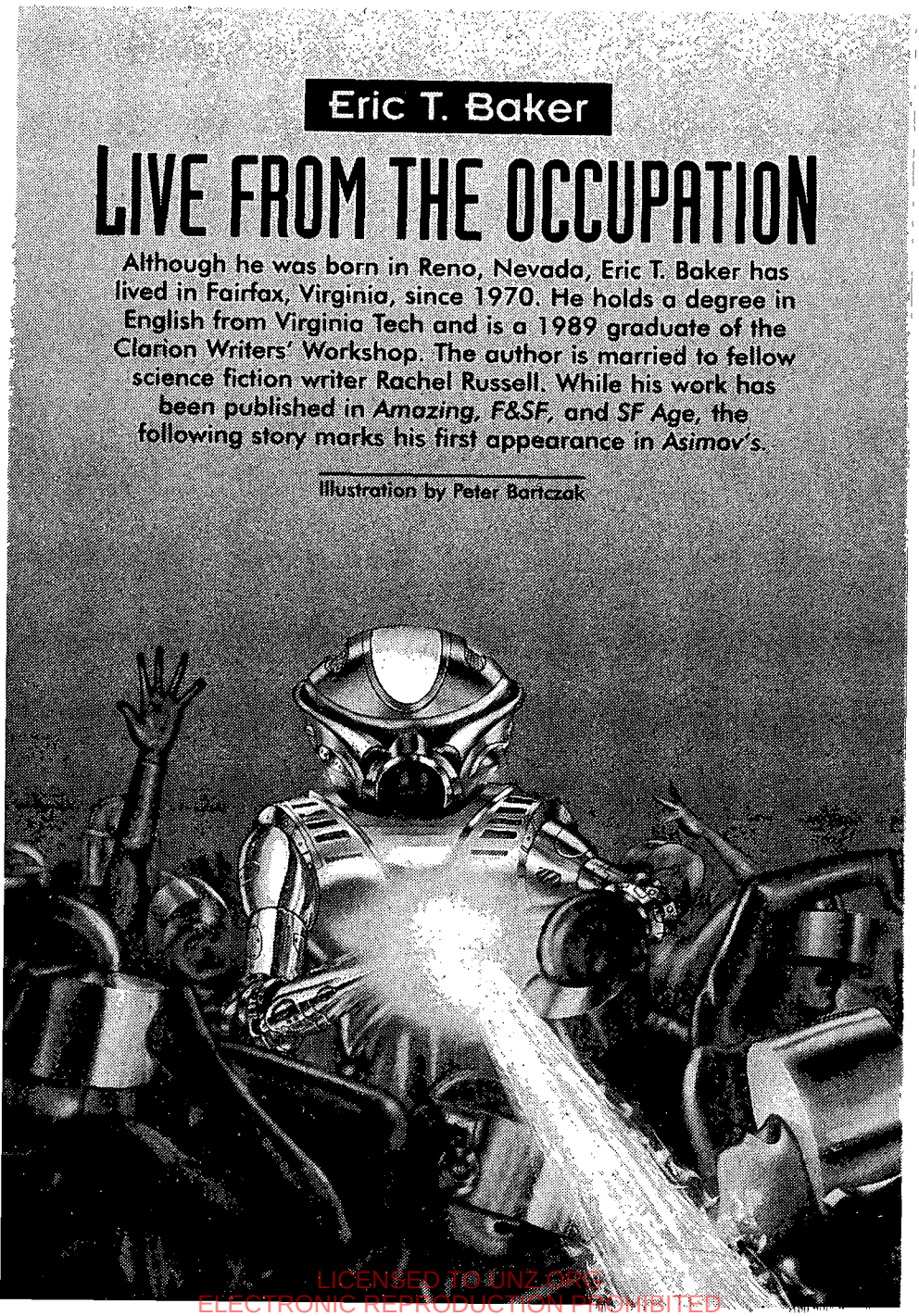
Eric T. Baker

LIVE FROM THE OCCUPATION

Although he was born in Reno, Nevada, Eric T. Baker has lived in Fairfax, Virginia, since 1970. He holds a degree in English from Virginia Tech and is a 1989 graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop. The author is married to fellow science fiction writer Rachel Russell. While his work has been published in *Amazing*, *F&SF*, and *SF Age*, the following story marks his first appearance in *Asimov's*.

Illustration by Peter Bartczak



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While flying to Iceland on the daily orbital shuttle, I had the good luck to meet Colonel Thebuho Kgaila, commander of the Commonwealth Militia garrison on that rebellious island. We were the only two passengers and the colonel actually walked back three rows and introduced himself. It was one of those surreal moments that seem to characterize text reporting in a media age. For a week, I had been fighting staff expert systems and virtual media-relations programs, trying without success to arrange an interview with this man, and now he was inviting himself into the smart seat next to mine.

Colonel Kgaila is the sort of wide-shouldered, square-chinned, iron-haired man that the militia would put on their recruiting posters, if the militia were allowed to recruit. He is a career officer, still with the forces ten years after the expiration of his obligatory service. He first made his mark as one of Prime Minister Selemela's whiz kids in the Americas Rescue, and at forty-five he is still being assigned to the Commonwealth's hottest trouble spots.

When I wasn't being put off by one automated answering service or another, I had spent the last week cataloging the huge stockpile of militiamen and their material stationed in Iceland, which had led me to increasingly nervous ruminations of how savage the Icelanders must be. With our landing only a quarter hour away, I was having trouble thinking of anything else. Thus, much sooner than was really polite, I asked the colonel how likely we were to be shot at.

"In the shuttle?" the colonel asked. When I nodded, he appeared to consider and then he said, "I would say our chances of being fired on are about equal to the chances of our being kicked to death by a duck." I must have looked as surprised as I felt because he added: "In the seventeen years since the annexation, there has never been an insurgent attack on a Commonwealth passenger craft."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Then why is there an entire regiment of armored militia garrisoned in Reykjavik, and a full company of them assigned just to defend the airport?"

"Frankly? I have no idea."

If the usage logs are any indication, Iceland looks to most sim users like either the tenement section of "The Mali's Revenge," or the glacier run in "Ski Pentathlon." Actually, the rubble strewn streets of "Revenge" were filmed in ruins of the United States's New York and the "Pentathlon" glacier is in the Antarctic, so close to the Malagasy mines that you would see the slag heap if they hadn't edited it out.

The reality is that the dome over Reykjavik, Iceland's capital city, was only five years old when the Plagues began and the city was still in tran-

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sition from an open to a protected community when the annexation came. Neat rows of painted concrete houses and truncated high rises form the base for the post-annexation jumble of cardboard add-ons and plastic extensions. The dome covers both of the ocean bays that give the city its switchback appearance, but only Commonwealth apparatchiks have built anything on the water. In short, if it weren't for all the white faces behind the motorcycle helmets and standing on the street corners, Reykjavik could easily be mistaken for a smaller, cleaner Cape Town.

Besides the white faces, however, there are a few jarring reminders that you are in nominally hostile territory. For a start, your personal computer won't link with anything. At the airport, I reflexively asked my PC to summon a cab, and it replied that there was no carrier onto the net. Well, of course not; that's the point of a blockade, isn't it? When I finally secured a taxi (by the ancient flat-lander technique of standing about and looking helpless until a driver took pity on me), the cabby took me directly to the city police station. There, a polite officer adjusted my computer to the island's own net protocols and installed a program to translate the native text and speech into Zulu.

On the front steps of the police building, while listening to my driver debate with a pair of officers which hotel to take me to, another reminder hove into view. A triad of militiamen in their three-meter-tall suits of powered armor rounded the corner and strode down the street past the station. Movement, conversation, and traffic all halted as they passed, and stoic, disapproving faces reflected in the chrome anti-laser shielding of the militiamen's armor.

To understand why I went to Iceland, you only had to be at the police station with me while they were adapting my PC. When a portly officer behind a sergeant's desk heard my name and profession, he asked if I was the Albert Keto who wrote for the Cape Town text service. When I admitted I was he said, "I really liked that piece you did on the squatters in Guantanamo Bay. You know, there's some talk of taking them in up here if they lose their appeal in the Commons."

This was the first time in six months that anyone beyond my immediate circle of friends had admitted reading the Cape Town Text, much less something I'd written for it. I shouldn't have been surprised; usage logs show that before Iceland was cut out of the net last year, fully 5 percent of the world's text service readers were on this island. Iceland held this percentage despite its containing only four hundred thousand people—not even a tenth of a percent of the Commonwealth's population.

What I said to the officer was, "That article appeared after the blockade. How did you read it?"

"Even under the blockade, we can still bring in hard copies. Print-outs are made in Liverpool, sailed up here, then scanned into our net. Better

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to get the news late than not at all."

On an island where they don't see the sun three months of the year, reading is an ancient and traditional way to kill the time until you can go fishing again. As late as the final decades of the previous century, Iceland had more writers and poets per capita than any other nation on the planet. If the absolute number of authors has fallen in this century, there are still far and away more people devoted to simple, unadorned text in Iceland than in any other place of my experience.

I went to Iceland because the people there care about what I do. What the Commonwealth and, more specifically, its militia are doing there is another question entirely.

It is one of the ironies of our young millennium that the only European nation to survive the Plague Years intact was the only one completely unequipped to oppose the Commonwealth's assumption of world rulership. In its seven hundred years of existence, Iceland has never had a standing army of its own, which may explain why it has had an independent government for only seventy of those seven hundred years. When the politicos and apparatchiks arrived on the island to impose the Commonwealth's rule, they were opposed by nothing more dangerous than angry words and a general strike.

From that beginning, Icelanders have remained active protesters and passive resisters of the Commonwealth's social engineering and its parliament. When Didier Ratsiraka, the first Commonwealth Governor of Iceland, ordered Reykjavik's police to begin enforcing the population control laws, the entire seven-hundred-person department resigned. When Styrmir Beinteninsson, Iceland's first Member of Parliament, took his seat in the Commons, not only did he arrive in person, but he used the occasion of his swearing-in to deliver a two-hour diatribe against the Commonwealth's occupation of his country.

Neither of these responses were noticeably effective. More armed militia were summoned to replace Reykjavik's unarmed police, and Iceland now has the same mandatory birth control and impressment into the militia of illegal children as the rest of the Commonwealth. Styrmir is still a member of the Commons, but that body was so unnerved by his tendency to track them down individually and lobby them in person that five years ago they revoked his travel privileges and he has been restricted to the island ever since.

Meanwhile, militiamen travel only in groups of at least three (both on and off duty), every Commonwealth official has a squad of bodyguards, and Commonwealth buildings are easily recognized by the bomb netting that drapes them.

Colonel Kgaila is right that there has never been an attack on a Com-

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monwealth passenger craft, but that does not mean that the Commonwealth's representatives have not faced violence. You cannot enforce population laws, control data access, and collect taxes without some people getting mad enough to pick up a brick or a shotgun, but in the beginning these were just random acts of passion, no more common in Reykjavik than in Monrovia or Marrakech.

The pressure that pushed paranoia in Iceland to its current level came quite literally from the Earth. Iceland is the most volcanically active island on the planet. There are spots where the magma flows so close to the surface that the natives bake bread by burying it in the ground. Much of the island's independence during the Plague Years was made possible by the widespread harnessing of the magma's thermal energy. Unfortunately, the magma is not always a ruly servant.

Two years ago, on May first of 2033, a crack opened in the earth outside Reykjavik, and the resulting lava flow not only created a two hundred and fifty meter tall mountain, but also threatened the very existence of the capital of the world's last European country. Two months later, Nadaba Hjalmarsson, one of only a handful of Icelandic natives born of African descent, was instrumental in setting off an explosion that collapsed the eastern rim of the new volcano's crater and diverted the lava flow away from the city. When it became clear that the city was out of danger, the Icelanders held a huge, all-night celebration. Nadaba was unable to attend. He and his fellows were in a Commonwealth jail.

It is easy to say (as the militia captain who conducted the arrests did) that the explosion was a clear-cut violation of the Commonwealth's environmental non-intervention laws, but only someone as single-minded and duty-bound as a militia captain could ignore the political and racial issues surrounding the case. The colonel then in command of the Iceland garrison (Kgaila's predecessor) certainly understood what he was getting into; he had the prisoners transferred to Kenya by orbital shuttle within an hour of their arrest.

The sims of the volcano, the explosion, the celebration, and the trial all served to put Iceland on the map. Not only did the virtual traffic increase (clogging the net so badly in the first hour after the explosion that travelers actually experienced stuttering in the sims) but real travel grew a hundredfold. A year after the eruption, there were three daily shuttles to Reykjavik with plans to add two more, plus zeppelin service. Styrmir Beinteninsson had to leave off his calls for independence and begin fighting the various development measures being introduced to the Commons.

It was in the middle of this furor, with Iceland threatening to become the next Casablanca (or at least the next Honolulu), that Dan Chakalame announced he would hold his fifth heavy-weight boxing championship defense in Iceland against Sveinbjorn Gunnarsson. Reservations poured in from all over the Commonwealth, and within hours a record crowd was

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booked to see the contest in person while millions more would watch it on sim. The fight was set for July 8, the anniversary of the volcano's defeat.

Styrmir Beinteninsson had read my articles too. I was beginning to feel as if people were prepping for my arrival, but Styrmir denied it. "I read everything about the other oppressed peoples. I think it helps if I can catalog the toll of evil that the Commons has approved to its members." Not that this was a possibility just at the moment.

"When the Commons were approving the PM's call to expel Iceland from Commonwealth's net, I pointed out that the blockade would have to be excepted in my case so that I could still attend sessions. That amendment was voted down. In that case, I said, the ban on my travel will have to be lifted so I can attend the sessions in person. That was voted down by a larger margin." Here Styrmir paused to puff at his pipe and shake his head. "The PM himself stood up to say that if Iceland wanted to be heard in Commons, it would have to elect someone civilized to the job."

Styrmir was conceived before gene tailoring had reached the point of being able to correct his dwarfism. Cosmetic treatments could give him more size and better-proportioned limbs, but "I prefer to remain as God made me." It also gives him the instant recognition and character that is no hindrance to a career politician. Add the pipe, the full white beard, the gray jacket, and the image of the Great-White-Father is complete, which probably adds to his complete lack of popularity outside of Iceland.

I asked why the Icelanders hadn't taken the Prime Minister's advice. Styrmir gestured out the window of his study. We were at his farm, which is about fifty kilometers east of Reykjavik, just outside the village of Selfoss. From his window I could see the barn, the silo that held the sheep fodder, and on the next hill, the family cemetery. Styrmir's family has been burying their dead on that hill for so many generations that time has worn the names off half the stone markers.

"This is a nation of farmers, fishermen, and sheep herders living in a very hostile land," Styrmir said. "You need a very stubborn character to remain here, and we have it."

From downstairs came the sound of children arguing. About fourteen people live in Styrmir's home and at least that many more were expected for dinner. By pre-population control Zulu standards, it was not a large household, but this was a post-population control era.

"It always comes back to that, doesn't it?" Styrmir laid his pipe aside. "There is no question that after the excesses of the twentieth century, there was a need for some sort of guiding hand to put the world back together, and it helped to have someone to blame. What the Commonwealth accomplished in Africa is amazing, a miracle, but we are not the ones who made that miracle necessary. Just because we are white skinned doesn't make us any less of a tribe than the Zulu or the Mashi or the Gurkha.

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"There are only four hundred thousand Europeans left here, and that is half of all the whites left in the world. Shouldn't we have the same right to secure our heritage as the other survivors of the Plagues?"

I put this question to Paris Mkhize, the current governor of Iceland. "One woman, one child," she replied. "It is the foundation of our success in this century, and despite what the Icelanders will tell you, it is working here as well."

Paris makes few concessions to her assigned land. She has a government barge on one of Reykjavik's bays and it is decorated with reminders of her Swaziland home. Her clothes are Johannesburg chic and we had a dinner of pork meticulously prepared without the fish oils that are ubiquitous in Icelandic cooking. She would pass without a stir in the House of Chieftains, which in fact is where her father, a tribal prince, serves.

It always seems rude to take up an argumentative tone with a mouth full of your host's food, so I politely asked if there was a parallel to be drawn between the Icelanders and the returning wildlife of Africa.

"Like the white rhinos?" Paris asked. "That was one of Beinteninsson's more embarrassing comparisons. The difference is that the rhinos were the victims of a predatory race and the damage it did to their environment. The white humans brought their near extinction on themselves."

Paris is a career diplomat and, like Colonel Kgaila, one of the best the Commonwealth has to offer. "No one likes to make comparisons between living, thinking humans and the animals of the savanna. Our policy here is based on treating the Icelanders like the human beings they are. They had the same rights as every other citizen until they threw them away. As soon as they admit their responsibility and turn over the criminals they are still shielding, we will welcome them back into the common fold."

It has been called the "Most Colossal Computer Crime of the Century." Also the "Worst Defeat in Militia History." And the "Greatest Act of Infamy since the Deforestation." Most commonly, though, it is called the "Boxing Day Massacre." A year later, the militia and the Commonwealth's Bureau of Technology Regulation are no closer to catching former Militia Captain Tiandraza and the programmers he abetted than they were the day it happened.

According to the usage logs, 10 percent of the world's sim units were tuned to the Chakalame-Gunnarsson Heavy Weight Championship boxing match when the Massacre sim replaced the boxing broadcast. An additional 30 percent of the world's units ran the replays before the BTR pulled them from the net. On top of that, 80 percent of the world's sim units have run (at least once) one of the sixty sims (in their wildly varied levels of factuality and quality) of the Massacre based on private record-

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ings and second-hand reports. In short, nearly every citizen of the Commonwealth has seen the ugly crowd of club-wielding Icelanders fall on the fight's exclusively African audience.

And that is the problem.

Before I came to Iceland, I went to see Nadaba Hjalmarsson at the Sahara Penal Colony. It is widely believed that the same underground that sponsored the Nadaba group's assault on the volcano also engineered the Boxing Day Massacre. I didn't expect Nadaba to confirm this to me, but he was a black man (his father was an Under-Secretary in the administration of Ratsiraka, the first Governor) who had sacrificed his liberty for his white homeland. I wanted his perspective on what the Massacre had accomplished.

"Nothing. Everything." We sat on a bench outside his dorm, the tinted sunlight from the dome giving the colony a gray color not unlike the way Reykjavik looks just before a rain storm.

"Before the volcano, we'd lost our autonomy again, but we were being largely left alone." Nadaba is too young to remember an Iceland that was not a part of the Commonwealth, but that doesn't stop him from talking like he does. In Iceland, I would encounter people who spoke of the Vikings' raids on the island as if they had been the day before, instead of six hundred years ago.

"Then the volcano and the trial and all of a sudden we were the next great unreformed territory. I could watch it all happening from here. It wasn't just the attempts to develop greater sim coverage and actual space for in-person tourism. It was also the drives to 'recover' the island. Reforestation, an end to bird harvesting, removal of non-native animals. They were talking about removing all the sheep!" I probably smiled at that, but now that I have been to Iceland, I wouldn't. Taking the sheep off Iceland would be like asking the Bantu tribes to do away with their cattle.

"So from that point of view, the Massacre was a good thing. Giving each citizen a chance to be virtually clubbed to death by an angry white man brought back all the paranoia and anger left over from the Americas Rescue. Even when it was revealed that it was just a sim and that the only danger the live audience had actually been in was from the militia and each other, no one wanted to have anything to do with Iceland anymore. Even the reform movement died under the perception that it would have to be carried out in the face of California-style violence."

I'd done enough research by that point to know that the militia was expecting that level of violence and I said so to Nadaba. He nodded.

"That's what we lost. Since the blockade, all I get from home are letters, but that's enough. When I was growing up, we were friends with the militia. We hung out with them in the same bars, invited them to dinners and saga readings. Mom has told me that she and Dad never suffered

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any ill wishes from either side. Now there is no more trust."

Nadaba had a pipe, a gift from Styrmir, and he took it out of his pocket then. While he filled it he said, "Perhaps it is better this way. When we had the Commonwealth's trust, they were going to let a volcano destroy our capital. Maybe all this means is that it will be a little harder the next time we have to defend ourselves."

I spent my last day in Iceland with Lieutenant Ellen Moleko's triad of militiamen on their foot patrol. They didn't actually strap me into one of their quarter-ton suits of armor. I stayed at Third Company Headquarters in a sim room that used the feed from the suits to give me the illusion that I was walking with them.

Ellen is one of the few militiamen still stationed here from before the eruption, and she too bemoaned the change in times. "We never wore the armor when I first came here. We'd negotiated the city police back to their jobs by then, which meant they were handling the petty crime. We were chasing illegal kids and investigating felonies. Even then we'd go in uniform and take a local to do the actual talking. Now, if we're on the street, we're in the armor."

I asked her if she'd ever been recruited to join the underground. "Constantly," she said, the question making her laugh. It was an odd sound coming from the gleaming metal suit, but of course it only existed in the sim that linked the triad and me. To the Icelanders on the street, the armored militiamen are as soundless as they are faceless.

"You know," Ellen went on, "everyone now thinks the underground was about killing people and driving the Commonwealth off the island. It wasn't. It was about the kids. The underground would try to find out who your real parents were. For most of us, the militia is all the family we want, but there were some who wanted to know. They'd find out who you came from, and then ask you to help them keep their illegal kids out of the militia. Turn a blind eye, forge a record. Just help them hang onto their kids."

No records are kept of where militia children come from, but from the annexation, the Icelanders have kept records of what babies were taken from which parents when. Once white kids started turning up in the militia, all the underground needed was their age and a blood sample. That was how they turned Captain Tiandraza. The underground introduced him to his real family and offered him a life outside the militia. He took it.

We were passing between two dome reaching towers of cardboard and plastic when suddenly all three militiamen whirled and directed their weapons upward. None of them fired, but in a moment something struck the road with a loud "splat."

"Water balloon," Ellen said. "Kids. They use slingshots to give the bal-

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loons enough velocity that our targeting computers acquire them. Gives the kids a thrill every time we overreact and blow one out of the sky."

I asked if she'd ever been attacked by anything more dangerous than a water balloon. "Last week we tried to claim an illegal child. The father poured a bucket of homemade napalm down the stairwell on to us. It's only styrofoam dissolved in ethanol, so it doesn't burn hot enough to damage the armor, but we have to smother it so it doesn't burn down the building. By the time we get upstairs, the kid is gone."

"And the father?"

"He was waiting with another bucket. We took him down and sent him to the Sahara." Ellen's voice held more pity than anger. "It's so stupid, having illegals in the first place and then getting locked up fighting for them, because we always find the kids eventually. There's no one inside the militia doing favors for the underground anymore, so it's just a matter of time."

I asked if she had known Captain Tiandraza.

"Tiandraza is a traitor and criminal and I will cheerfully deliver him to the Sahara when he is captured. I was in the arena the night of the Massacre, and I know how close we came to killing a lot of innocent people." Inside the armor, the militiamen are basically wearing sim suits. The night of the boxing match, Tiandraza gave the codes to the Iceland programmers that let them override the feed from the sensors of the militiamen's own armor and plunge the soldiers into the programmers' sim.

Thus, the militiamen inside the arena experienced the same illusion of the white madmen as the rest of the world's viewers. It was the militia's attempts to subdue the non-existent threats that panicked the arena crowd and led to what injuries actually occurred. Since that time, the militia's armor has been rewired so that they can't be submerged in a remote sim, but Ellen admitted that the militiamen don't have the same invincible confidence in the armor anymore.

"How dangerous is it here, really?" I asked as we passed another group of young Icelandic men standing on a street corner, all of them silent and staring, seemingly straight at me even though I wasn't physically there.

"Well, put it this way. If Command would let us take off the armor, I'd rather serve here than in Cape Town."

"Why won't they let you take off the armor?" I asked.

The silvery suit of composite metals turned up its palms. "I don't know." ●

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L. Timmel Duchamp

BETTINA'S BET

The author tells us that, "Gareth Branwyn, in an article in *Flame Wars: the Discourse of Cyberculture* (Duke University Press, 1994), asks: 'As more people spend greater amounts of time in cyberspace and come to identify themselves increasingly with their various cyber constructs and non-physical relationships, won't the boundaries between "real" and "imaginary" have less practical significance?' " Ms. Duchamp thinks that "Bettina's Bet" suggests this question is not, as Branwyn presumes, rhetorical.

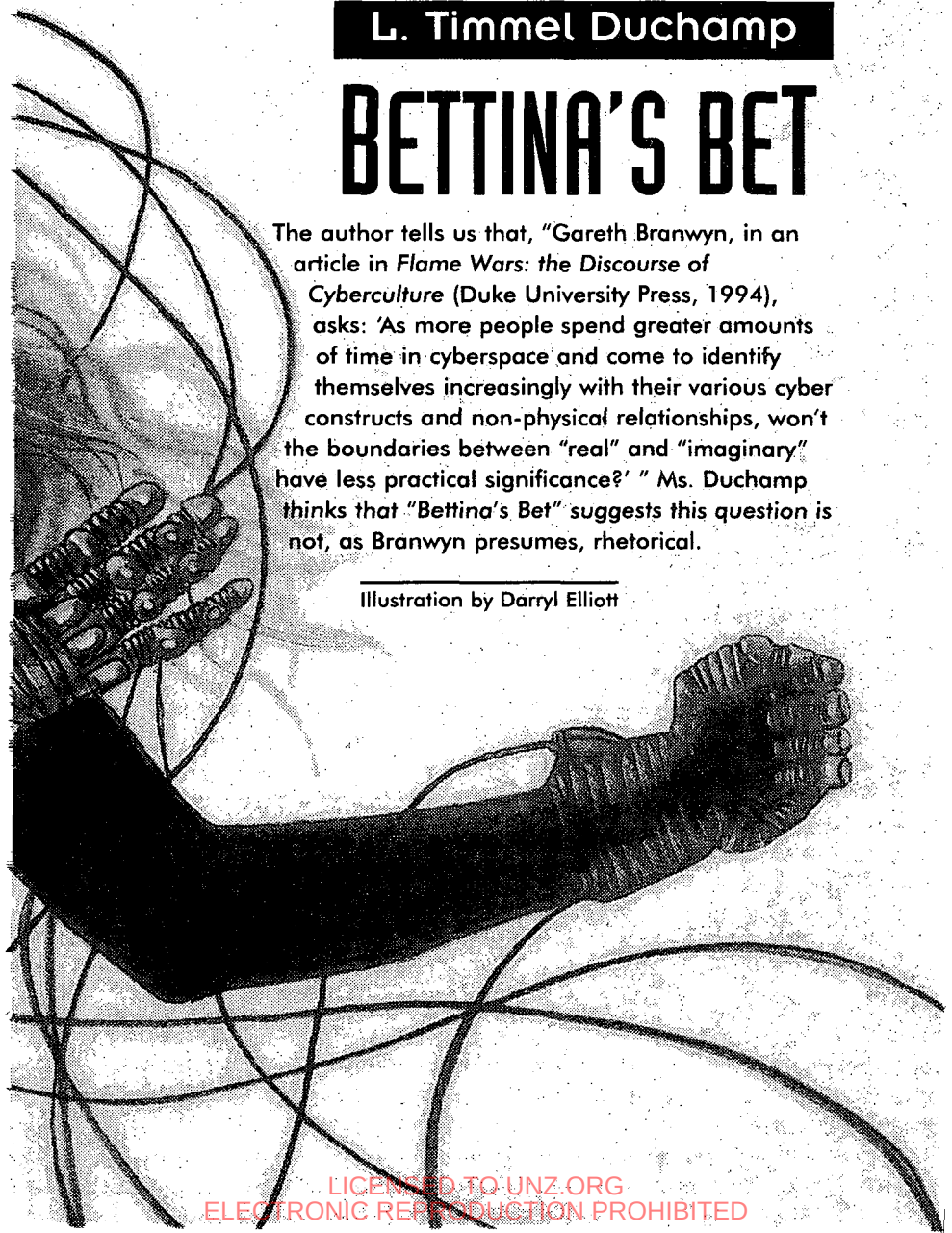

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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Hwame skimmed the summaries in his mail queue. Mayra Bauer, he saw, had sent text with her HP communication. He wondered: More documents for the project? Eagerly he played out her communication first.

A miniature of Mayra, short, erect, and round, characteristically swathed in cerise, sprang up before him. The date and time of the recording—02/12/23:20:03:22—overlay the red-stockinged ankles and indigo-slippered feet. "Miles!" she said, her voice cracking with enthusiasm. "I did a search of the archives of the State of Michigan, using Javitts's name as a keyword. It turned up several dozen cases in which Javitts submitted psychological evaluations for convicted prisoners awaiting sentencing. Listen, Miles, I think I've found exactly what we need. I've been through about half of them, and so far have found the origins of Javitts's theory of the evolution of human mental categories present in three. The early theorizing is crude—tellingly so. I simply can't imagine any reasonable person failing to see the flaws in the general theory once they get a look at the precursor versions." Mayra paused, drew a deep breath, and folded her arms over the large pillowy shelf of her breasts; she grinned ruefully. "Yes, Miles, I know, I know. I can almost hear your despairing, cynical response. It may turn out to be not only as eye-opening as later revelations about certain of Freud's earlier cases, but as non-threatening to the supremacy of the theory as those cases were to the supremacy of Freudian theory. So Freud mutilated a patient's nose in order to cure her emotional (and therefore sexual) problems (as well as to prove his and his partner's theory)? So Freud assumed that teenaged girls were sick if they weren't sexually responsive whenever any older male pressed himself on them? All right, so the various revelations never touched the real partisans. I admit it, most people can tolerate an infinite amount of cognitive dissonance. But we've got to try, Miles. If we don't stop these maniacs it won't be long before they start using the Javitts Scale of Natural Selection and Normal Adaptation to render people like you and me into genetic dead-ends. Just remember: once Congress passes the bill requiring sterilization for all adults not scoring within the so-called normal parameters of the Javitts Scale, the Supreme Court will be our last hope. We've got to get on this, man."

The tiny eyes of Mayra's image peered intently at him, as though looking directly into his face. "When you've read the documents I'm sending with this letter, you'll see why I'm so full of new fight. They're Javitts's first recorded mention of genetic deficiencies vis-à-vis psychological reactions to cyber-constructs. Oh, and there's a reference to a more elaborate report, of which these documents provide only a summary. The data base apparently doesn't have it, who knows why. I'll have to see if I can locate a hardcopy, supposing such a thing is still extant. The other two I've so far found, which I'll send you when I've finished going through the rest of

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the cases, actually offer more developed arguments sketching a precursor theory of Javitts's Categories of Human Mental Evolution. I believe they'll help us deduce the logic—if one can call it that—that informs the theory as a whole. Still, I think when you've read it you'll agree that this first case, Miles, is our baby. It's the beginning. It's the knot from which Javitts started knitting the empire, and therefore the knot that once undone will let us unravel the whole damned mess with a few sharp, quick tugs on the thread." The cerise-draped arms lifted in a two-fisted gesture of victory. "Empires can be unraveled, Miles. And this one is no exception. Never doubt it."

The projection cut out, and Kwame was left, as usual, feeling slightly flattened at the sudden absence of the drama and exuberance Mayra's messages always conveyed. She'll be grand, promoting the book, he thought as he reached for his text reader. But she's going to have to learn to leave her knitting metaphors out of it, since few of the people we need to convince have a clue as to what knitting even is. . . .

File #09242286.PSA

Pre-Sentencing Advisory in re: Inmate #F7742286

Contents:

A. Transcript of selected monologues made by the inmate during post-conviction, pre-sentencing confinement, providing a general overview of the inmate's psychological state.

B. Summary of pre-sentencing advice to the Court by A.N. Javitts, M.D.

A. Transcript of Selected Monologues of Inmate #F7742286

1.

[07.28.63/11:24:06]

. . . and so came to a clearing in a wood, a wood with trees barren of leaves, their branches limning the starkness of winter, except that the sun was beating down all golden warmth and love, like Indian Summer, and the leaves thick on the ground were two feet deep, and calling me. The smell of them, dry and crackling—it was only in my imagination, I know, there wasn't anything for me to smell, yeah, but somehow I did smell them, that dry autumn fragrance totally unlike the vegetable, rotting smells of summer . . . *clean,* the autumn smell is, not fresh but *clean,* a clearing-away. Anyway, I stood there purely wallowing in the smell I put where none actually was, and then a spurt of joy took me, I mean it took me over, like a burst of manic, electric energy, made me fling myself into the deep cushion of leaves and immerse myself, like it was the warm

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salt water of a gulf. And I rolled in those leaves, giggling, soft, soft—to myself. (It was one of the good kind of things, one of the few that's allowed, you know? Well *I* know. I know it's good.) So—just for that little bit of time—I tapped into that certain spirit inside, you know, that spark that starts to die as you get older and tired and set into synch with a cynical mean world. And it felt so fine, to find out it was still there. I'd been thinking lately that I'd lost it totally.

Then, while I was rolling around letting the leaves brush my face and crackle in my hair (the hair that I had in that setting, which was long, yeah, long and straight, as I don't have these days in real-space), a pair of boots came and planted themselves in my face (catching my eye, so to speak), which sobered me fast, and made me look up and scramble to my feet to brace for something nasty. Only when I saw it wasn't a man, but a woman, young and okay-looking, not the snob or dweeb type, the panic drained out of me. Why? I've been thinking about it, and I believe it was just simple reflex. I mean, I know that it could have been a man looking like a woman. For kicks. To take me by surprise or whatever. And I know that women can be ugly mean customers, too. But we're talking reflex here. How I reacted before I had time to get around to thinking.

So then the next thing I know, I'm rolling around in the leaves with this woman I've never met, and we're playing like puppies or preschoolers, that kind of thing. No meanness, just the pleasure of tapping into that same spirit. It's probably stupid of me, but thinking about it now almost makes me wonder if things couldn't really be different. If Jamie's way isn't the only one.

Of course the next thing I know, the Ugly Grating Voice of Authority pulls an interrupt. "Recreation period is over." And I'm back in the world of the four gray sponge walls, and my body's folded into a Half-Lotus, and the leaves and sun are a memory without reality. And somehow I feel worse than I did before recreation period. (Though yeah, there's no way to know that I wouldn't have felt worse if I'd just gone on sitting there in interminable gray solitude.)

But that's jail for you.

2.

[08.10.63/20:04:49]

Dr. Javitts says I'm not supposed to talk like to her, but really just to myself. That my talking to her doesn't mean shit, because the real problem is with me. And that I'm not facing up to it. That the point of isolation isn't just to keep me from contaminating other inmates, but so that I'll come to understand how and where I went wrong. (And even that I did, which she says I don't yet admit.) (Well I think it's a slander to say

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I'm "bent." You can't dispute the legal code, and going by what it says, I know I did wrong—but if anyone's "bent" it's Jamie. Which, I might add, I've never held against him, either.)

So. I'm not supposed to be pretending I'm having a conversation with another person. But that's hard. Really hard. Because it makes me feel like a crazy person, sitting here talking to myself, out loud, even if it is what the doc says I'm supposed to be doing. I don't see why if I have to talk out loud I can't either pretend I'm talking to a second person, or else do this talking in cyberspace, where I could at least sit down and look at some reasonable version of myself (not any of the ones the jail's stuck me with, that would be too, too gross) while I'm talking. . . . And then it would be like talking in a mirror, only better. (Obviously I don't look half as cool in the flesh as any cyberspace version Jamie ever gave me to use.)

Jamie. Yeah. It always comes back to him. He's the one who's been legally wronged. "The injured party," Dr. Javitts calls him. "Explore the reasons you did it. And not by just repeating the story you always tell when asked," Dr. Javitts said in our last session. But the whole thing is totally obvious, I said to Javitts. What's there to explore?

Start with your relations before you assaulted him, Dr. Javitts said. So all right. I'll do that. I'll tell the story of our sick, twisted, perverse relationship.

Hey. I've just had a *fascinating* thought. I used to think constantly about my relationship with Jamie. How we met. Our early meetings. But I haven't thought about any of it since the day I proved him wrong about himself. I mean, I used to be *obsessed* with all the teeniest tiniest details. But though I spend all my time alone, between these four dirty gray boring drab walls, none of it ever crosses my mind now.

It's like the whole thing's settled, isn't it. Like I had a catharsis. Yeah. Now I ask you, how can losing an obsession be unhealthy? Twisted? Bent?

But all right. To start from the top. I met Jamie the day he came to check his old man into the nursing home where I work. Or rather, worked. I was on what we call the "taxi patrol"—which means I was detailed to pick up and deliver patients from point A to point B. In this case, the patient was Jamie's father, point A was Admitting, and point B was Five Northeast. Like most of the patients on Five, this old dude wasn't all that old. Not decrepit, not crippled, not even short of breath. But going by the book, not only did Jamie have to input all the data into the admitting terminal for his father, but I had to give the dude a ride to Five Northeast. Later, Jamie told me that his father didn't have an active medical problem—but that a slew of docs had said that heart disease was eventually going to get him. As everyone knows, the younger you are when you check yourself into a womb, the longer you'll live, because your cells won't have to be battling free radicals and all that. Which was enough for

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Jamie's old man, I guess. Still, according to Jamie, his father was seriously into downhill skiing and mountain hiking and swimming twenty laps every day in his company's gym. Can you figure it? I know I can't. But I didn't say this to Jamie at first. (I mean, it was creepy to think about, and embarrassing to bring up. And so up until the time Jamie made an issue of it, I just kind of kept my thoughts on the subject to myself.)

So anyway, I deliver Jamie's old man to Five Northeast, and then go on to the next pickup the dispatcher assigns me. Since I do maybe thirty or so of these jobs in one shift, I wasn't thinking of that particular one at all when, waiting for the bus at the stop across from the nursing home, Jamie pulls up in this really sleek sweet car and offers me a lift. I didn't recognize him at first, and refused. But then when he refreshed my memory, I decided what the hell (though considering he was still a relative stranger, I know I was an idiot for getting into his car anyway). . . . So we went to this really neat place for coffee, and ended up sitting there talking for hours, swapping our life stories. After that we had a second meeting, where he talked me into a cyberspace date . . . and the rest, as they say, was history.

I guess you could say the conflict was there from Go. I mean, him helping his old man to put himself away so he could live (if you can call it that) the rest of his life in cyberspace, which I found super-gross. And him telling me I'm a moron for working a real-space job that's "demeaning" and low-paying. (And did it matter, when I pointed out that somebody had to work in child-care centers and nursing homes and hospitals? Of course not! He said that those jobs should all just go either to robots or to what he called the "intellectually and socially dysfunctional"! As though such jobs could be held by just anybody!) (Though maybe he's right, maybe the taxi patrol and other nursing-home jobs could be done by robots, but considering how most patients at Green Haven aren't like those on Five Northeast, it sounds cruel and inhuman to me.)

Enough of this shit. My voice is getting hoarse, and the food hatch is beeping.

3.

[08.23.63/06:05:27]

Have I ever been this lonely in all the lonely desert that's been my life? For answer, consider my desperation every time the jail's system shoves me into its cyberspace with the announcement by the Ugly Grating Voice of Authority of "visiting period." Visiting period means, at best, a meeting with my mother. And always, always, always, the terror and hope (both at the same time) that maybe Jamie will be surprising me.

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The visiting period I just finished sitting through netted me zero visitors. It's cruel, the way the jail yanks all inmates into cyberspace whether they have visitors or not. Each time you face the disappointment of zero visitors, you're also stuck sitting between a cyberspace set of four gray walls. The first time this happened, I kept hoping it meant that the connection had been delayed, not that I was being kept there as a regular, general thing. But jail never has individualized reasons for anything that happens in it, only rules that are generally applied whether appropriate or not.

You wouldn't think it would make any difference. (But it does, the way so many totally trivial things do when you're in jail.) I guess it's the sense of rejection that gets pounded into you when you're sitting there, waiting, waiting, just waiting to be released back into your real-space cell. And though there's no reason to, I always shiver, as though there's a chill in my bones, gripping my heart. And I've been thinking about this, too, and maybe the best way to put it into words, would be to say it's a figurative cold that makes itself psychosomatically real. Yeah. Psychosomatically real.

My mother says that visiting periods are always scheduled somewhere between eleven at night and seven in the morning. When they fall at three A.M. during the work week, she just can't make it. She's a plumber, she needs her sleep. And Dad—well, like, I know I won't be hearing from him. He's "disowned" me. He says I'm no daughter of his. Strange, when it was always Dad who was my good bud (when he was in the mood) and Mom who just couldn't stop herself from constantly finding fault with me.

"Your crime is not a gender issue," Dr. Javitts says. (Which is exactly what the prosecutor and judge said during the trial, too.) I never claimed it was (even if my lawyer tried to argue that). I've always said it was a question of my proving Jamie wrong. And the fact that Jamie hasn't visited me proves I succeeded in doing it, too. If he was right about what he thought he felt and believed, then he'd see me and say he has no problem with what I did. But the fact that he hasn't shown up to do that only proves my point.

And so that's my real sin: having been right, having done what I did under such circumstances. Because if Jamie didn't care, then what I did to him wouldn't really have been wrong, would it?

4.

[09.07.63/13:46:19]

Dr. Javitts says I'm not working hard enough to find the answers to the questions. She also says that only when I do will I then be "fit" to be sentenced, which is the only way out of this "limbo" (as Mom calls it).

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Yeah. The question of why I did it (and "to win the bet" isn't the "correct" answer), and also of what my real feelings toward men and sex are. (Can you believe it? When everyone agrees it's not a "gender issue"? Talk about contradictions! I'd like to know just how I'm supposed to come up with some kind of theory about how I have bent ideas about men and sex without it being some kind of gender thing!)

Look. I never had trouble with men. I never went out that much, true. But that's only because I'm not what you'd call a cool piece of action. Not because I wasn't interested. (Even if I do like to read about romance and sex more than plod through the real thing, which, let's admit it, is usually pretty boring.) Let's just say that until Jamie took an interest in me I never really managed more than ten or twenty one-night-stands I had with pickups.

Actually, I kind of assumed that that was the kind of move Jamie was making when he pulled up that day at the bus stop. A slick dude like him, smelling of money and class. Not the kind of character who's going to be interested in much more than a fast fuck or two. So I was flattered, you know, really totally flattered when he expressed some more general interest in me.

Not that I know why, even now!

But hey. My throat's dry. And drinking too much water makes me have to piss, and I hate using the fucking vacuum-cleaner-like contraption that passes for a toilet in this place. So I think I'll just stop now for a while.

God this place sucks.

5.

[09.11.63/02:44:03]

So—I'm practically bouncing off the walls with energy, thanks to a visit from Clea. The doc's always talking about maybe starting me on antidepressants, but the fact is that if they'd let me access books, and allowed more visits, there wouldn't be any fucking "depression" to "be concerned for." Yeah. But since for a lifelong bookworm like me reading is fun, they won't let me do it. (They don't even give you the usual word cues in their damned cyberspace, because reading them—instead of hearing the nauseating Ugly Grating Voice of Authority—would be a pleasure, however fleeting.) (Basically, they don't want you to feel like a human being. "You've put yourself outside society and culture, Bettina," Dr. Javitts says. "Therefore the amenities of society must be denied you, until you come to terms with exactly how and why and even that you made yourself an outlaw.") So I'm not a human being. A *social* human being. Right.

Actually, I was shocked when I saw Clea. I mean, after she gave away

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all our most private conversations in court, I like thought she fucking hated me. But it turns out that it was she who thought I must hate her. (Even though it was my lawyer, not the prosecutor, who asked her to do the talking.) It was only when Mom told her that I didn't hold anything against her that she decided that maybe she would visit, to try to patch up what the legal system had tried to destroy. The reason it took her so long, though, was that the idiot computer screening applications for jail visits kept tagging her as a "media opportunist" out to get the juicy details firsthand, for future exploitation. (Which of course is a no-no, until after sentencing.) Finally, though, she got cleared. (Now that's loyalty: she kept trying and trying, even though a big part of her was sure I was hating her guts and would get ugly with her if she did get access.)

But if it shocked me to see Clea, it shocked her *severely* to see the bod the jail makes me use for visiting period. (Mom described it to me during her second visit, when I made her.) It's bald, for one thing (like I was when they first brought me here and shaved my head). And it's basically just a mess of lumpiness in a gray sack that's exactly like the one they make me wear in real-space.

But except for that first awkward minute or two, it was totally cool. She'd just taken in a really neat cyberspace installation—endlessly elaborate, the kind of thing you could spend hours poking around in—on the subject of male bodies. Needless to say, one thing led to another, I mean her description of some of the neat insights into social perceptions and presentations of male bodies by various of the media kind of naturally led into the old shared fantasies about Jamie, and from there to . . . well, real giggles, you know? I mean, though what I did was serious, there's also this sense of hysteria you just can't avoid when you start thinking about it all from a certain angle. . . .

Clea said it was two in the morning. Which means it must now be close to three. It feels a little like late afternoon to me, that's how fucked-up jail is. Bedtime, or nap, who cares. I'm getting good at sleeping with the light on (though according to Dr. Javitts, that's what's messing up my menstrual cycle, which she says is normal for most women who have a "prolonged" pre-sentencing period). (Ha-ha, funny joke, isn't it, Doc?)

6.

[09.14.63/15:20:19]

(Sensors monitoring the inmate's pulse, respiration and blood pressure were set off at 03:19, and visual inspection revealed she was masturbating. The following monologue ensued after a First Warning had been delivered orally to the inmate to desist.) Damn you, damn you, I didn't even notice what I was doing! I mean, I was just sitting here thinking. And

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then this siren goes off and the Ugly Grating Voice of Authority threatens me with full-time incarceration in a cyberspace cell where masturbation is physically impossible! Is that fair, if I don't happen to notice I'm doing it? But nothing's fair here. Jesus. You say I can't have any more visits from Clea because I "blew" the one you did let me have. Blew it! Well fuck it! You never told me that the whole *point* was to talk "seriously" about Jamie and my crime. How was I supposed to know that?

Don't you people realize you are *killing* me? Do you think I can't feel the bones sticking out all over on my body now? It's like it's not my body anymore! I've *never* been bony, not even when I was a kid! But this fucking diet you've got me on—grub so boring anyone not kept in a condition of near-starvation wouldn't touch the shit—god knows how many pounds I've dropped. Which is really fucking ironic, you know. Jamie's not here to see it. Won't ever see it. The bodies he had me use in cyberspace—man, they were all anorexic. Walking skeletons, really. I mean, except for his disgust with flesh, I'd never want to look like that. Sure, I always wanted to be thinner. But *that* thin? A woman'd have to be on her deathbed to get that kind of thin, and then what would be the point?

And Jamie looking like one of those dudes in the cunt-throbbers I used to blow my budget on. Long, flowing black hair—"raven," like they say in those books. Silky. Down to his fucking asshole. Oh honey. A real beauty. And the hands—graceful, with long bony fingers, about six rings on each hand, and sexy leather bracelets up and down both forearms. Mmmhmm. The messages he sent out, by the way he walked, and stood. And his eyes—hot molten brown lava, as they say. And a heartbreakingly beautiful jaw. I just couldn't get enough looking at him—only he didn't care about that, didn't care to give me a chance to look at him in realspace, no, all the dude wanted was to be in cyberspace all the time. And there came then that unforgettable Saturday afternoon, which happened after we'd been doing cyberspace kind of things a few times, by which time I'd started to get big-time major horny for him, that he went just about foaming-at-the-mouth crazy when I said I wanted us to take our clothes off. He couldn't stand the thought of seeing me naked, he said, it would be a super gross-out. Yeah. I wanted the floor to open and swallow me up. I wanted to disappear. Like being in a room full of people where everyone's staring at you and when you happen to catch a look at yourself in the mirror you see there's snot drooling out of your nose. Only like, this is me, this is my body, how I am. So it wasn't like I could just wipe it away, was it. And so of course I started rushing the hell out of there as fast as I could, when he grabs me and says that none of that's important. ("That" being . . . what? Sex? Real-space presence? My body? Or his feelings about my body?) Betts, Betts, he says, don't you understand it's your psyche that I'm into. Your body doesn't matter. *My* body doesn't matter. We can have any kind of bodies we want in cyberspace. Right. I guess I

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should have known, because of the cyberspace bodies he'd so far been giving me. (Not that I saw that much of them—just enough to see that most parts of them, at least, were skeletal, and never had any tits to speak of, which at that point hadn't yet meant all that much, though it made me a little uneasy, since it so clearly wasn't anything like the real me.)

So now I'm bony in real-space, too. Who knows, maybe I'll look like a skeleton by the time you people are through with me. I can feel only stubble where my hair used to be. Haven't had a period since the trial. And I know it must be past time. My breasts haven't even gotten swollen—and I'm always always horny the week before my bod starts loading fluid for the next period. I wasn't masturbating because I'm especially horny, you know. I mean, I've hardly had any kind of physical feelings but hunger and insomnia in this place at all since I've gotten here. But shit, there's nothing else to do here. My mind was on auto-pilot. And my fingers just did what comes natural, out of boredom. Because this place isn't natural, you know. It isn't healthy. I mean, human beings aren't meant to be always physically alone. Sitting in a gray space talking to themselves, man.

Is anybody listening? Spying on me, yeah. But *listening?* No. Of course not. I'm just fucking talking to myself, as usual. I mean, it doesn't matter what I say until I say the magic words. So all right. Tell me what they are and I'll say them! Just tell me. I can't take this. It's killing me. I know I'm going to die if I keep on this way. I just know it. I can feel it in my belly. It's like a worm inside me, eating me out from the inside. Or rather, worms. Yeah, a whole nest of them. Writhing, their slimy tentacles burrowing in and eating me out. And nothing to stop them! Oh god. There's nothing there! Nothing there! Nothing there! Did you inject them in me, is that what you did? And maybe you're just waiting to see how long it takes them to kill me. An experiment! I'm an experiment! Is that a fair trade, I ask you? *IS ANYBODY LISTENING?????? (The inmate at this point grew incoherent. After ten minutes of sustained hysteria, the monitor triggered the release of a dose of tranquilizer from the medication capsule implanted in her thigh at the time of processing, and the inmate subsided into twilight sleep.—A.N.J.)*

7.

[09.22.63/12:14:59]

So. I have to like start fresh. I've been fucking up major, here. And in the words of Dr. Javitts, if I don't get my head together soon, I'll be in deep, deep shit. (Not that she'll say exactly what that would work out to be.) I feel as though I'm in deep shit already. Not just being in isolation, and awaiting sentencing for my felony conviction, but in the sense that

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I'm probably just about ready to fall apart. Mentally. That's what makes me nervous about all this talking out loud to myself. I mean, I'm supposed to do it to sort of think out loud, to work out what has gone wrong with me. And so as not to inhibit the process, I'm just supposed to do it whenever I feel as though I might be going to think seriously about it. But all of this "free-speaking" makes me wonder. Whether I'm not turning into a real looney-toon. Because I catch myself talking to myself even when I didn't mean to be doing it. Now in here, maybe that passes for sanity. (Like the "compulsive behavior" they only a few hours ago zapped my frontal cerebral cortex to cure—the doc said that when they did a visual inspection of me and discovered my blowing-on-my-fingers thing, that it was no big deal, and that they could have eliminated that right when it got started, if only I'd let her know about it.) But if they ever let me go back to seeing other people in real-space, that kind of thing would have to go straight off. I mean, can you imagine, finding myself babbling away when there are live people around? They might think I have one of those contagious mental viruses. And wouldn't that be a load.

But the thing is, to be serious. Which isn't that big a deal for me, since people have been telling me since Day One to lighten up. So here's serious topic number one, that Javitts said to try working on. My last rec period. So okay, it was the scene in the forest with the leaves. But this time I didn't get any kind of kick from it at all. Didn't smell anything. And everything looked sort of like a holographic animation, Saturday morning kind of stuff. So I don't roll in the leaves. But this woman shows up anyway. Which pisses me off. And so I tell her to get the fuck out of my space. I mean, it's my rec period, I got the right to decide. But she doesn't take no for an answer. And so I jump her and knock her into the leaves and kick her (and she takes it, doesn't make a move to defend herself, even though she has those mean-looking boots on). Of course all the time I'm punching and kicking her I'm thinking about how she's just a computer projection being bounced into my optic cortex from a satellite orbiting the earth, and how she doesn't feel a thing, even if there's a personality somewhere behind the image. And that if there is a personality, it's of someone who works for the jail. And so then I really go at her, yelling and screaming my head off, calling her every shit-name I can think of. (Most of them Jamie's favorites.) And the damned Voice doesn't interrupt, and the woman doesn't disappear and so finally I get tired and walk away. And what happens, but that I come on her again! And so I know I'm not going to get rid of her by kicking her face in. And the whole thing just makes me frustrated and so I start to cry. And she comes and puts her arms around me and this just makes me more upset instead of giving me any kind of good feeling. But then, because I'm thinking about how it's a jail production and is probably meant as some kind of lesson (instead of genuine recreation), I say I'm sorry. And then the Ugly Grating Voice of

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Authority releases me, and I'm back between the four gray sponge walls.

I suppose the whole thing comes down to resentment. Resentment at being so alone. Resentment at only getting these cyber-contacts, which are just totally phony. I mean, I wouldn't have tried to beat up a stranger in real-space. It would just never cross my mind. And I never feel that antagonistic toward anyone. Not even Jamie. When I cut him with the laser scalpel, I wasn't feeling rage, the way I did during the last rec period at having that image invading my space. The only time I ever felt rage at Jamie was when we played in his cyberspaces. But that was all make-believe, too—in the sense that he wasn't really hurting me physically—not giving me any real physical pain. The sensory connections in the standard consumer cyberprograms aren't made for pain reception. And most of the sensory connections are pretty crude, anyway, except for detailed sensation in the hands. And, of course, the genitals—though there the sensations don't really correspond to the way they'd work out in real-space (which they mostly do for the hands), but just trigger horniness and orgasms. And so all the while I was pissed-off at Jamie for the things he was doing to me I'd be either getting super-horny or having orgasms.

Yeah, I know, I probably should talk about that. I mean, according to Jamie, that should have made up for everything that I didn't like. The fact that I didn't feel any physical pain, the fact that I did experience orgasms, made him impatient with my not wanting to play his games. But so what if I came? It didn't make me feel good. And afterward I'd hardly remember coming, just all the other shit he and I were doing and saying at the time. And of course I couldn't talk to him about it. Like explain why I didn't like it. I mean, he had to have known why I didn't want to do it. Except that he kept saying I was a prude, and a little simpleminded, to want to do it in cyberspace the way people do it in real-space, when the whole point of cyberspace is to make a different kind of reality than the one we already have, not to pretend that it's the same.

And me, I was always the kind of kid who couldn't back down on a dare. I hated to be thought a coward. I guess it was just plain luck that until I met Jamie no one had ever really dared me to do anything self-destructive or criminal.

8.

[09.23.63/17:22:36]

Okay. So now I'm supposed to think about why I didn't just walk away from Jamie and his games. Why I kept on with it even though doing that kind of shit made me feel bad. Well, it's simple. As I said when Dr. Javitts raised the question in our last session, I had such a thing for him that I couldn't even think of dropping him. And second, I'm not a coward, and I

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knew that even if I'd walked away, some of the things Jamie was always hinting around at might stick with my head—hey, I know they would. I know that much about myself. And I'd always regret it. I mean here was the one time I had real contact with someone that cool. I mean, he was like out of a book or a soap! Everything about him, not just his looks. And he was basically a decent guy, even if his sexual tastes were bent. And then, when he made the bet with me—how could I have walked away from that?

Dr. Javitts says the bet isn't the "intrinsic reason" for my "crime." It's only an "alibi," she says (though I thought alibis were supposed to be stories that excused you from committing crimes, which isn't at all what I'm claiming, I never claimed I didn't cut Jamie). I'm supposed to explore the bet, to get beyond the superficial meaning covering over its real meaning.

So. We had this bet, because I wanted to spend time with Jamie in real-space (which he never would do after our first couple of meetings), and he wanted to get me internally connected, so that I wouldn't have to come over to his place and get myself wired up each time. And the bet was that he could get me to see that cyberspace has more to offer than real-space—that it'd be better for me to practically live in it, the way he and his old man do. And if he won, he'd pay for internal connection, and even help me find a decent cyberspace job. My side of the bet was that I could get him to admit there was plenty worth doing in real-space. It seemed pretty obvious to me, that though he had that dinky little apartment, in fact he liked the amenities of real-space—I mean, considering the car he owned (which was previously his old man's), and the places he liked to go to eat (where he sometimes took me), I really thought I had a chance at winning. And the payoff if I won would be our having sex in real-space. (I bet the prosecutor just hated that part of it—that Jamie wouldn't have to spend a dime on me if I won, while it'd cost him a pile if he won.)

Of course it embarrassed me in court. I mean, people would think nothing if the forfeiture on my part would be sex, instead of vice versa. But Clea understood—even if she did tend to think that what Jamie wanted would be just super. But what I've tried to explain, is that Jamie wasn't entirely himself in cyberspace. It was like he would sometimes become someone else, depending on the body-image he was using at the time. It was playacting, I guess. Which would have been all right, except that the more time we spent in cyberspace, the more that became all there was—playacting. To me, that's not life. That's not living. That's not engaging with reality. (Which is what I finally told Jamie. And it was right after I told him that that he proposed the bet.) So it was like he was a Jekyll/Hyde—only with lots of variations on the Hyde side. And the Jekyll part almost never accessible.

But about the bet—it did change things. It added a certain edge. The

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edge had been there before—for me, anyway, but always covert. Because I didn't want a real fight with him. And also because every time I was about to call it quits, he'd turned sweet (just as if he knew I was about at the limits of what I would take). Would spend some time with me in real-space, give me a driving lesson in his car, take me out to dinner, that kind of thing. And then he'd be perfect (except that he felt no attraction to me in real-space, which I could always sense, and would make me feel uneasy and worthless and lonely but still not that bad, because he was being so sweet and totally focused on me). Ooh, the way he could look at me—never taking his eyes off my face, like there was nothing else in the universe but him and me . . . nobody else has ever looked at me that way. Nobody. And I know no one ever will again, either. . . .

(Subject broke off speaking here, and sobbed and mumbled incoherently for roughly twenty-eight minutes.—A.N.J.)

9.

[09.25.63/01:14:38]

Yeah. So today's subject of unilateral conversation concerns what Dr. Javitts calls an evasion of the facts. Namely, why I keep insisting that I cut Jamie to win the bet, when I could have, say, trashed his car or his apartment instead. Which, though it could have gotten him super-pissed-off at me, wouldn't have done lasting, permanent damage to him personally. Or, as the doc summarized the question, why didn't I try something a little less drastic.

Now this, I have to admit, is a fair question. Because looking at the situation superficially, it would seem obvious that I could have gotten him by damaging mere property. And I admit that it has always been my honest belief that Jamie is attached to his car. So right away, when we made the bet, I mentioned it to him, casually. Sort of as a joke. Well, he said, the car was valuable to him for a) the cash it would someday bring him, which he could then "invest" in cyberspace, and b) as a comfortable convenience for getting around as long as he was still "outside" (which is how he liked to refer to real-space). Ultimately, he said, the car would mean nothing to him once he had taken his Dad's route. So then, after he loaded all this shit on me (with a ridiculous smirk, purely disdainful, you know?), he said that if I took a good look around the apartment I'd see there was almost nothing in it. (Which was true—and it was a dinky place, besides—being basically about the size of the space I had in my parents' apartment.) Almost everything he made, he said, went on cyberspace programs, utilities, facilities and games. And, he said, that even though he was young and in good health, he was already seriously considering going his Dad's route once he could feel totally confident that he

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could make it psychologically and security-wise "inside" (which is how he usually referred to cyberspace). I thought about his Dad lying in one of those creepy wombs on Five Northeast, and asked him what he meant, about making it. He said that a) people permanently inside needed someone outside who they could trust to take care of any real-space situation that might come up that they couldn't handle themselves from inside, and that b) some people freaked out when they tried to live inside for more than twelve out of the twenty-four hours of each day. His Dad had gone through months and months of testing and conditioning before he'd checked himself into Green Haven.

Anyway, if I'd trashed his car, he would have claimed to be pissed at my depriving him of the cash it was worth, and still not have lost the bet. The thing with cutting him was that he was always claiming that only the parts of his body useful to him in cyberspace—his brain, his other vital organs that kept him alive, and whatever he could use in real-space to make his cyberspace life better—mattered. And so you see that really didn't leave much in his life that he couldn't claim served to advance his cyberspace existence, did it?

10.

[09.29.63/16:38:09]

God, I'm really totally bummed out now. I feel like my head's being chopped and shredded for creaming in one of those yucky yellow-white sauces Dad sometimes makes when he's "in the mood" to cook. If they pull many more numbers like the one I just had to go through, there's not going to be anything left to be sentenced (supposing the judge ever gets around to doing it).

Okay. So I get the warning from the Ugly Grating Voice of Authority that in five minutes I'll be dumped into visiting period. So all right. I get myself situated, in the usual Half-Lotus, the way you're supposed to when you're going to be doing cyberspace for over a couple of minutes and under an hour. And then sure enough, the jail's system pulls me into the hall they make you wait in during visiting period. But what it turns out is happening is that they're messing with my head. Even though I'm back in my real-space cell now, I'm still shaking from the whole experience. Yeah. So after about half a minute or so (though who knows, I have trouble figuring the passing of time even in real-space, which is more natural to my body rhythms than time passing in cyberspace), the little stick-figure light over the door into the visiting area changes from red to green. And I naïvely think, hey, I got a visitor. So I go nonchalantly in, knowing it can't be anybody but Mom, I put on my friendly grateful smile, the reformed loving daughter and all that—until I see who my visitor is. Oh

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man. I almost shat in my pants when I saw that image. It was one of Jamie's faves. And the first thing I think is that he must be pissed as hell at me. And the second thing I think is how shitty I must look, with the horror image the jail's stuck me with. But then I glance down at what I can see of my cyberbod, and discover that it isn't any of the ones the jail ever gives me, but one of the skeleton-girls Jamie used to have me use! Pretty freaky, right? Yeah. Well then while I'm just standing there staring down at the bony knees of this cyberchick bod, Jamie says, "Hey, Betts. How's it going? Must get boring in this place. So how about a game of Killer Sex in the Maze?"

By this point everything that's happened between us is running through my head, and so I say, "You're not mad at me, Jamie? Tell me the truth, are you upset at what I did? I'm really and truly sorry if you are. Or is it like you claimed about all real-space shit? And it didn't matter at all?"

Now I know this sounds callous. But though I wanted him to know I was sorry, I also wanted to know whether I'd won the bet or not.

But Jamie just takes my hand and pulls me through a third door (one that's never there when Mom visits), right into his Maze cyberspace. Which is this big old spooky mansion, lit only by occasional flickering candles, honeycombed with hundreds of hallways and staircases dripping with cobwebs that brush against your skin. (There've been times I could have sworn they were sticky, though I suppose it was purely a psychological response on my part.) So then Jamie tells me to run, that he's got a laser scalpel and a welding torch he's going to get me with if/when he catches me, and suddenly I'm alone, and running, and getting harrowed by booby-traps and rabid, slavering animals on the loose in the house. And of course the whole time I'm lost, and wondering if I'll ever find the safe well-lit room with the cozy fire and telephone—I supposedly having misplaced my own—for calling the police. (I never have found the place, not in all the dozens of times I've played the game. For all I know it could be something Jamie told me was in the space, but never really was. Just to motivate me for play.)

And of course I run and run and run. And though I don't lose my breath or get a stitch in my side, still I get worn out and tired with the running and fear. Maybe there's no physical effort involved to explain it. But the point is, I guess, it's really the strain of too much adrenalized nervous energy. Yeah. So my heartburn comes back, really bad. And my heart's pounding like mad, because I don't want Jamie to get me. I mean, I really really don't. More than I could seriously ever put into words. I know, the horror of it is all in my head. But still, I have this terrible dread. It makes me jump and scream whenever I think he's found me.

It takes a long time. But Jamie does eventually get me, and I scream and sob and beg for mercy before he even starts on me. And he just

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laughs with one of those horror-movie giggles, and puts me through all that scary humiliating shit, just like he always does. And still I plead with him, I beg, and he keeps on laughing at me, and tells me I like it. (And then makes me have an orgasm, just to prove it.) But this time, I'm so worked up that I start screaming at him, about how I cut him, how I really cut his real body lying totally defenseless in real-space while his conscious self was in cyberspace, and how I'm glad I did it and how I'd do it again if I had the chance, that it was what he wanted anyway, wasn't it, ha ha ha.

And then, Zap. Without any warning I get dumped back into real-space by the jail's system. And here I am, still shaking from the terror of it, and even while I'm talking about it I keep hearing my voice screaming at him that I'm not sorry, that I'm glad, and that I'm especially glad that I chopped his thing into little pieces after I cut it off his body, so that it could never be fixed, never be replaced, never be his again.

I know the jail was just playing games with my head, and that it probably wasn't really Jamie behind that cyberbod of his. Still. It felt exactly like him, and the laugh was the same and the words and all that. So it might as well have been him, right? Whatever. It's at times like this that I guess I do hate that bastard's guts. Not enough to kill him, no. But just to show him how seriously fucking screwed-up and wrong he is. You know?

B. Summary of Pre-Sentencing Advice to the Court:

As is revealed from the final monologue included in this file, a re-enactment of a typical interaction between the inmate, Bettina Raymonde Smith-Weber, and her victim, the inmate feels no genuine remorse for her crime, despite her protestations at other times to the contrary. Considering the serious nature of the felony she committed, and the circumstances in which she committed it, it is my strong recommendation that she be permanently confined in maximum security as an incorrigible, unpredictable threat to society.

It is the general rule that psychiatric consultants recommend permanent maximum-security incarceration for only those inmates deemed sociopathic. While the inmate did not test out as sociopathic in the initial standardized screening, it is my hypothesis, supported by the results of custom-designed tests, that this inmate suffers from a disease of the mind hitherto unmanifested in the human organism. While the inmate's personal history reveals no long-standing identifiable tendency to violence, and while she shows a perfect intellectual facility for distinguishing between cyberspace settings and real-space reality, she nevertheless has manifested (and continues to manifest) an inability to distinguish be-

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tween them psychologically. Apparently, what happens in the course of cyberspace games is as real to her as anything occurring in real-space, and accordingly informs her attitudes and behavior in real-space. Hence, she used a laser scalpel in real-space, in imitation of its use in a cyberspace game, supposedly (as she constantly claims) to help her win the real-space "game" she characterizes as having been a bet made between her and her victim.

It is my hypothesis that this as yet nameless disease is a new form of sociopathy, occasioned by an inability to process, *psychologically,* movement between cyberspace settings and real-space. The disease may or may not be due to an organic (possibly even genetic) inefficiency, that has only now, with the advent of the quotidian use of cyberspace, appeared. (See file #09242286.PSE for a greater elaboration of this diagnosis, and for access to the custom-designed tests mentioned above.) Clearly further research on the subject is warranted, pursuant both to childhood screening (such as we use to detect ordinary sociopathy), as well as to possible mitigating treatments or even a cure.

(signed) Arthur Norman Javitts, M.D.
10 October, 2063

To: Mayra Bauer
From: Miles Kwame
Re: The Case of Bettina Smith-Weber

Mayra, I know you disdain object-relation constructs because of their genealogical origins, but this case practically throws them in one's face. Consider: Bettina relates to Jamie as a part-object, not a whole person. She becomes violently enraged by his lack of engagement with *her*. Her major problems with cyberspace are 1) her belief that where Jamie's concerned she's a substitutable cipher, less real to him than the roles and cyberbodies he assigns to her; and 2) her inability in that context to achieve identification with Jamie (as would be usual in a real-space sado-masochistic relationship, the likely analog of their cyberspace relationship), perhaps because of the very totality of the role as it exists in the cyberspace games they play. Bettina focuses on Jamie's failure to engage sexually with her—a metaphor, if you will, for all that she wants from him. He doesn't—in Kleinian terms—satisfy, rather he represents the "bad breast" (fully in line with her relating to him as a split-object). Ironically, Jamie plays to this symbolism by assigning her anorectic cyberbodies, which in the logic of one arrested in the oral phase is an underscoring of his constitution as the "bad breast." So what Bettina does is attack, literally, the very metonym of her dissatisfaction, his penis. She knows very well she's not doing it to win the bet, but to punish him—and

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show him that she's dissatisfied with him—in the one sphere in which she has some control—the physical. In cyberspace *he* makes the rules, assigns the roles and so on.

Now, about Javitts's manipulation and analyses of her case: obviously we can't say to what extent he understood and intentionally aggravated her neurosis. Certainly he must have intended to stimulate the rage that provoked her assault. (If Javitts had been a genuine healer he would have been working to bring her to the stage of mourning, so that she could see and accept Jamie—and all of her other others—as a whole, independent person.) In all her monologues she never once manifested confusion between real-space and cyberspace. The issue, as he develops it from this case forward, is what he calls "emotional processing" of movement between the two states. This is the key to his theory, and the basis of the Javitts scale. Is that, in short, what we see in this case?

While Bettina's emotional reactions to the Maze game are powerful—a mixture of fear, humiliation and rage—when talking about it afterward, at least, she does not perceive the game itself as reality, but rather as a scene in which certain sorts of interactions take place. What she does do—and what Javitts seems to take for a failure to "emotionally process" the movement between the two states—is take the emotions she experiences during the game *personally—they* are real to her, and in her mind define her relationship to Jamie (since playing cyberspace games with her pretty much defines the parameters of his interest). The analog in real-space would be sexual games—without, let's stipulate, physical pain or harm. Would we define a person who reacted in such a context as Bettina did as failing to emotionally process the movement from play to reality? Clearly it was the humiliation and dissatisfaction that were real to Bettina; the medium in which the interaction was experienced was virtually insignificant. One wonders whether any behavior and response someone in Bettina's situation might have made to Jamie's demands would have been regarded as healthy. From my own point of view the only "healthy" response would have been to leave the relationship, since the only means of satisfaction for either of them would be to the other's dissatisfaction.

Certainly one can talk about different psychical responses to cyberspace. People like Jamie feel an oceanic oneness in achieving freedom from what they perceive as the grossness of physicality, and perceive unlimited possibilities for emotional satisfaction in cyberspace. Others do not. The Javitts School has never managed to isolate genetic material it can hold responsible for aversive responses to cyberspace immersion. Yet by arguing from the premise that the human species is—and must evolve beyond—its "animal" nature, anyone admitting to a strong attachment to the physical is marked as manifesting the phenotype of a gene or genes not yet identified. I don't think anyone would deny that the wild demo-

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graphic fluctuations and resulting geopolitical upheavals that have come about as a result of the differences in fertility of cyberspace-inhabiting populations from non-cyberspace-inhabiting populations are a cause for concern. Establishing incentives for cyberspace-inhabiting persons to reproduce are one thing; sterilizing those who do not ever intend to live full-time in cyberspace is quite another. I have no doubt that the hardest core of Congressional support for such a measure can be found among those who know that many other countries—and major institutions like the IMF and World Bank—are likely to imitate congressional passage of the measure. (Certain countries have for years been working to rid themselves of indigenous populations and ethnic minorities; with new justification as well as logistic support and economic assistance in carrying out this new policy, they might finally succeed.)

Let me be frank, Mayra. I don't think this or the other early Javitts cases will do much to impress the general public. The argument is too subtle, and Bettina's crime too violent and suggestive of strong emotional aberration. (Ordinary citizens will identify with Jamie, and be aghast at the idea of an intimate friend taking advantage of that particular vulnerability.) Rather I think we must rely on the strength of the argument for preserving natural selection, and genetic diversity. Many of the proponents of the sterilization bill are arguing for changing the definition of "human" to the exclusion of all that is physically brutal and violent. Bettina would serve them well as an image of the regressive, animal human mired in criminal instincts. Your idea was excellent, and your ingenuity in unearthing these cases admirable. But please, let's do ourselves a favor, and drop it.

Best regards,
Miles

The Office of the Deputy Attorney General
of the United States
Washington, D.C.
15 March, 2123

To: Rodney R. Wilson, U.S. Attorney, San Francisco, CA
Re: Operation New Order
Dear Roy:

The file that accompanies this letter contains a report from the Bureau as well as transcripts of their extensive surveillance on Miles Kwame and Mayra Bauer, both professors at UC-Berkeley, and co-conspirators in activities in violation of several felony-class federal statutes. Their plot began as an effort to destroy the reputation of Arthur Javitts (which, since he is deceased, would not in itself be illegal, of course), in an attempt to

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discredit the Javitts Scale of Natural Selection and Normal Adaptation and all of its proponents as well (an undertaking so ludicrous as to suggest a serious mental deficit in both of them). After Congress passed the bill mandating sterilization of the maladapted, however, their efforts expanded into the formation of an organization to aid maladapts in avoiding detection, and failing that, sterilization. (N.B. the electronic transfer of funds from the Frente Febe Elizabeth Velasquez, a known front organization for the Coalition for Violent Revolution now operating widely throughout the hemisphere.)

Your instructions are, therefore, to have Kwame and Bauer detained and charged as suggested in the concluding section of the Bureau report. If you think any additional charges should be brought, or if you think the Bureau's evaluation is mistaken and any or all of the charges should be dropped, this can be done in the usual way, after the suspects have been arrested (and after due consultation, of course, with my office).

I strongly advise that after you have detained them you put them through not only the Javitts scale, but the Memphis Inventory as well. I've skimmed enough of the file myself to conclude that though they both seem to share a common notion of reality, it is not one any normal American could recognize as sane, rational or healthy. (In which case a trial would be a needless expense, and thus difficult to defend to the taxpayers, should the case garner any public attention at all.) Moreover, both of them spend only the requisite amount of time in cyberspace for fulfilling their professional obligations; and both are ethnic-food junkies (as a result of which Bauer is grossly overweight, as Kwame would be, were he not addicted to the endorphin highs produced by excessive amounts of running).

Your appearance on the *Sharon Jessamy Cyberconference* was first rate. The AG himself happened to catch some of it while cyberconference cruising, and was immensely pleased at the quality of your presence.

Cordially,
Bernard P. Behrens
Deputy Attorney General of the United States ●

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NEXT ISSUE

FEBRUARY COVER STORY

Mary Rosenblum, one of our most popular authors and winner of the prestigious Compton Crook Award, returns to these pages next month with our February cover story, a big, fast-paced, and vividly colored new novella that takes us from the Pacific coast to the boiling, storm-whipped, anything-but-pacific cloud oceans of Jupiter, plunging us deep within the raging, turbulent atmosphere of the King Planet itself on an awesome and immensely dangerous journey of discovery—and also plunging us just as deeply into a vortex of another sort, a whirlpool of love and betrayal, tragedy and redemption— as it details the bizarre and fascinating odyssey of a "Gas Fish."

TOP-FLIGHT PROFESSIONALS

Hugo-Award winner **Charles Sheffield** whips up a tasty stew of espionage, politics, international intrigue, and high-tech, hard-science adventure, as he investigates an astounding scientific discovery that may have been made in the land of "The Peacock Throne"; World Fantasy Award-winner **Howard Waldrop,** who has been called "the resident Weird Mind of our generation," takes us back to a Hollywood from before there was a Hollywood, for a charming and funny encounter (and one that sports a very unusual Cast of Characters) with some "Flatfeet!"; Nebula and Hugo-winner **Geoffrey A. Landis** gives us some touching and bittersweet suggestions on what to do during "The Last Sunset"; **Robert Reed** takes us to a bloody, dangerous, ultraviolent, and suspiciously banal future for a ringside seat for the bizarre adventures of "The Apollo Man"; **Steven Utley** returns with a hard-eyed look at a troubled future New York in which "Race Relations" area even more complicated than they are today; and new writer **Daniel Marcus** lets us know just how it feels to suddenly find that you've become a "Prairie Godmother."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column discusses "Gods Almighty," Paul Di Filippo serves up an "On Books" column, plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

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by Norman Spinrad

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Tor, $21.95, 1995
THE DIAMOND AGE
Neal Stephenson
Bantam Spectra, $22.95, 1995
KAMIKAZE L'AMOUR
Richard Kadrey
St. Martins, $20.95, 1995
GAIA'S TOYS
Rebecca Ore
Tor, $22.95, 1995
SLOW FUNERAL
Rebecca Ore
Tor, $21.95, 1994

It is the best of times, and it is the worst of times, and it is high time we started getting serious about it.

I have been writing these columns for well over a decade now, and the good news is that seldom if ever have I seen so many promising new talents debut or begin to emerge in the field of speculative literature as in the last two or three years.

The bad news is that *never* have such interesting and seriously intended early novels been so buried in a such a sky-high mountain of cynical crap. Never has the editorial and commercial pressure upon science fiction writers to eschew the former and churn out the latter been so direly severe. Never before has apparent editorial idealism and sheer pedagogic attention to the literary development of science fiction writers sunk to the present abyssal level.

It has long been a general critical stricture that one should not review books one has not read, and it has long been *my* personal stricture not to torture myself by plowing through piles of media tie-ins, game world novels, franchise universe items, and twelfth volumes of trilogies for the dubious purpose of shooting fish in a barrel with a machine-gun.

And yet. . . .

And yet from the beginning it has been my commission here to attempt to place newly published SF novels in some kind of context—literary, historical, and con-

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temporary—for it has long been my conviction that no one writes anything in a cultural and economic vacuum.

So for some time now, I have been pondering the dilemma of how to consider the plight of the idealistic and talented beginning or emerging science fiction writer in the current horrendous publishing context without either descending to the intellectually dishonest practice of reviewing books by their schlocky covers and breathlessly fulsome blurbs or losing my lunch.

It is an even more severe no-no in my book to use material from personal letters or conversation for public purposes, but things being what they are, I certainly feel free to report that I have been getting plenty of anguished plaints on these matters from colleagues ranging from first novelists to writers whose lists of publications far exceed my own.

It is a critical stricture in certain intellectual circles that one should only review books one can praise. This is a rule to which I do not subscribe, since I believe the critic does a service to readers by warning them away from heavily promoted stinkers or books that otherwise do not live up to high expectations and does a service to writers by analyzing the occasional failures of writers of substance.

Still, as someone once said before they blew his mind out in a car, it is better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness.

And as karma would have it, what has somehow managed to percolate up to the top of the pile of my recent reading are three promising first novels of varying degrees of literary success plus three contrasting second novels by writers of previously proven literary merit and two entirely different novels by a writer hovering on the cusp of major recognition.

Collectively they would seem to provide the opportunity to examine the current existential position of sincere and talented SF writers in critical moments at various stages in their careers and to consider their alternate future destinies in the light of the current commercial pressures without resort to the tiresome critical demolition of even more tiresome literary television.

This Side of Judgment by J.R. Dunn is a realistic near-future thriller set in a finely detailed future United States, tautly written, well-plotted, and imbued with considerable psychological depth.

Which is to say that it is an almost astonishingly well-crafted and mature first science fiction novel by current standards. Raw talent is one thing, but the level of craftsmanship displayed by Dunn is quite another.

Talent can be neither taught nor learned, but craftsmanship must be, either by considerable practice, study, or at the hands of good editors, and preferably by a balanced combination of all three.

In this era when, as one writer bemoaned to me, it is easier to sell a first trilogy than a first novel and all too many people do, J.R. Dunn is a bit of a throwback to the days

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when science fiction writers customarily spent an apprenticeship learning their chops writing short fiction and a rep by publishing same in the magazines and original anthologies before presuming to approach the novelistic form or a publisher with a portion and outline for an open-ended series that ossifies a career before it is born.

Thus it is perhaps no accident that the author of a first novel as sophisticatedly mature as *This Side of Judgment,* rather than being an unknown, should have achieved a certain noteworthiness in the short form.

Nor that among the editors of whose attention he has had the benefit should be Ellen Datlow, who, though never a novel editor herself, has probably more directly and positively influenced the literary development of more science fiction writers of substance than most of the current editors of SF book lines.

This is something to ponder while we consider the other two first novels under consideration, both of which show considerable promise, but both of which would have benefited from more careful and rigorous editorial attention than a textual reading would seem to indicate that they got.

If either Valerie J. Freireich, author of *Becoming Human,* or Stuart Hopen, author of *Warp Angel,* have had major bodies of short fiction in print behind them before publishing their first novels, neither have come to my attention.

Becoming Human is an uneven novel whose considerable thematic reach somewhat exceeds its more modest level of sophisticated craftsmanship and mastery of prose.

The novel is set in an interstellar culture where an underclass of various functional castes of deliberately short-lived cloned humans not only serve as slaves but, at least until well into the novel, accept such status on a reasonably deep level, and the core of this story of interplanetary intrigue and low-level warfare is the stepwise self-discovery and psychological and political "becoming human" of the main cloned protagonist.

The story, though not exactly novel, is well-structured and well-told, the theme is a grand one, the character development upon which it depends is successful, the interstellar society is pretty well-rendered with telling details, and the conclusion does satisfy.

Which is to say *Becoming Human* is quite a creditable first science fiction novel; it stands up well in comparison, for example, to my own first effort, *The Solarians.*

If that seems a bit like damning with faint praise, well, so be it. By my lights at least, *Becoming Human* is a fairly typical first science fiction novel of a certain sort; thematically ambitious material encompassed by a reasonably interesting story competently told in unexceptional but intermittently awkward prose.

Hurrah for the occasional bolides of genius who burst upon the scene in full flower, but given that sever-

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al hundred new SF novels are published in any year, the development of relatively raw but sincerely ambitious talents like Valerie J. Freireich into writers of substance and craftsmanship will always be central to the health of the genre.

Had she been put through another draft by a rigorous line editor who had the time, knew what they were doing and cared, it would not only have been a better novel, but the writer would have learned much of future benefit in the admittedly grueling process.

I would not venture a prediction of Valerie J. Freireich's future based on this novel, any more than a past critic could have based a prediction of my present on a reading of *The Solarians*. She could develop into a major science fiction writer. She could disappear. She could become a competent mid-list craftsperson. She could go on to a modestly lucrative career novelizing TV shows and role-playing games.

Stuart Hopen's first novel, *Warp Angel,* is something else again, a kind of gonzo ride through the assorted planets of a baroque solar system in a universe where the constants have been changed by excessive use of a now-banned FTL drive. It is filled with well-realized, exotic characters and crazed cultural details up to and including a weird far future transformation of Hasidic Judaism.

It is also fairly sloppily written in places.

It also has an ending that, while thematically and dramatically satisfying, seems perilously close to a set-up for volume two of a trilogy or even an open-ended series.

I *would* dare to venture some tentative predictions of *Hopen's* future based on *Warp Angel,* for unlike the Freireich, this is not the debut of a writer of some talent playing it down the middle of the genre and potentially capable of developing from the center outward. A reading of *Warp Angel* reveals Hopen to be the sort of wild talent who approaches SF from his own strange angle of attack from word one, and whose present flaws stem from his central virtue, an exuberant imagination and an enthusiasm for excess.

It's hard to imagine such a writer developing into a mid-list journeyman. It's easy to imagine him evolving into a major talent. It's just as easy to imagine him burning out. I would say it's hard to imagine him hacking out media tie-ins or turned into a literary burger-flipper in someone else's franchise universe, except I would've said the same thing about K.W. Jeter, of whose heartfelt work *Warp Angel* is somehow vaguely reminiscent, and alas, I would have been wrong.

Here are two promising first novelists fairly typical of the recent bumper crop in two respects: neither would appear to have served a long literary apprenticeship in the short forms, and both are in need of both careful line editing and the career advice of wise and idealistic novel editors at this tenderly nascent moment in their careers.

On the record, it would seem

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that the line editing has not been fully forthcoming, and as for career advice, one shudders to contemplate what they are likely to get.

Magazine (or original anthology) editors have two basic jobs: to discover and select good stories and to work with writers to turn them into the best they can be. No one story will much affect the sales of any issue of the magazine, the sales of no one issue will much affect the editor's fate, and the rates are usually pretty much standard, so the editor of short science fiction is free to concentrate on the actual art and craft of *editing*.

This is why an adequate apprenticeship under one or more good short story editors is a much better early career move than a leap directly from writers' workshops into the novel. You will learn much more by writing a dozen quite different stories than by writing the same wordage as one novel, and the good short fiction editors are pretty much hired mainly to help you do it, without the contradictions between art and commerce inherent in the current relationship between book editors and writers.

For in this enlightened age, editors of science fiction *books* have at least four jobs. Like the magazine editors, they must of course select works for publication and at least in theory work with the writers thereof to put them into the best possible shape.

Unlike magazine editors, however, they must haggle with the writer or the writer's agent over advances and contract terms, representing a corporation whose interest is in getting things as cheaply as possible in negotiations with someone whose interest is in getting as much money as possible out of them. This inherently antagonistic financial dialectic, needless to say, does not always advance the comradeship and trust desirable for a good creative relationship.

Worse still, modern major SF book editors must function as *publishing executives*. They must promote the books they buy at conventions. They must calculate profit and loss statements to get the authority to buy them in the first place. They must deal with art directors. They must pitch books to editorial meetings. They must pitch them to the sales force. They must fight for their relatively meager advertising and promotion budgets and allocate the results.

Which is to say they are grossly overworked and their departments are grossly understaffed. It's becoming more and more obvious that these harried SF editors are forced more and more to rely upon free-lance copy editors to put the marginal manuscripts into publishable form and to let good SF novels come out without the careful line editing they deserve.

Take *Armed Memory* by Jim Young as a typical example. This is technically a second novel by a career diplomat, but functionally something of a second first novel, as it were, being the first he has written in fifteen years.

In Young's future America (the

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tale being set in New York and Minneapolis), "microding," a kind of retroactive form of genetic engineering, allows one to transform one's body according to the latest trends and fashions. A mysterious cult called the Hammerheads, related to old oriental triads, turns its acolytes into a form of human shark, and follows a complex metaphysical impulse to destroy all life on land.

Armed Memory, then, is a kind of psychologically sophisticated action thriller, and as the brief curriculum vitae might lead one to hope, it is a mature and wise piece of work informed by world-wise wisdom and telling cultural detail.

Not merely a good science fiction novel, but an excellent one, and one that was eminently publishable in its present form.

But. . . .

Young has chosen to tell his tale from several viewpoints, both first person and third, and to overlap time-sequences so that events are not depicted in a strictly linear manner. There is nothing wrong with this—far from it, it is a powerful and useful literary technique, and for the most part it works well in his novel.

But here and there it becomes awkward, confusing, and disorienting in a manner I doubt the author intended. And a reasonably careful reading by an editor should've spotted these lapses. And guided by proper editorial notes, a writer of Jim Young's manifest skill and level of craftsmanship should have been able (assuming he was working on a computer and didn't have to retype a new clean draft of the whole manuscript) to fix things up in a week.

The lack of this sort of editing which turns good books into better ones, perfects excellent ones, and teaches talented writers the details of craft seems to have become endemic. The result is that too many good books, even excellent ones, are published with easily correctable elementary mistakes, the most prevalent one seeming to be that all too many newer SF writers seemed to have never learned that it is not at all a good idea to keep changing viewpoint characters within the same scene.

Under the cruel pressures of cost-cutting and editorial understaffing, this sort of higher-level editing (as opposed to copy editing) seems in danger of becoming extinct.

Or, as an editorial idealist bemoaned to me in far sunnier days shortly before throwing in the towel: "When I was just an editor, all I wanted was the power to edit the books I cared about my way, but now that I'm a publishing executive and have it, I just don't have the time."

Worse still, much worse, today's SF editors are judged, which is to say hired and fired, by their corporate masters not on the basis of the literary excellence of the books in their line or the number of Hugos and Nebulas garnered but by the ruthless cold equations of the bottom line.

True, a major aspect of their

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complex job remains developing writers like Freireich and Hopen into accomplished professionals capable of regularly contributing successful titles to their lists. But a "successful" science fiction novel these days is defined in terms of total sales and sell-through. And total sales and sell-through are heavily influenced by the orders of a handful of major chain buyers. And if the editors cannot figure out what those buyers want, the buyers are more than ready and willing to enlighten them.

And if *you* don't know what that is, you need merely peruse the SF racks and observe what predominates. Novels based on TV shows, role-playing games, films, video games, comic book characters, lines of toys, braided cross-over franchised universe novels in formats suggested by the laundry lists of Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov. Next maybe the outer space adventures of Ronald McDonald and Beavis and Butthead.

Make no mistake about it, this is what the general public now perceives "science fiction," aka "sci-fi," to be, since, after all, this is what they see as they slink past the SF racks, and this is what is most heavily advertised as "SF."

And make no mistake about it either, this stuff *sells*. It outsells real science fiction by an order of magnitude. How can it not? How can a seriously intended science fiction novel with a promotion budget of close to zilch compete with a *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* or *Batman* novelization whose parent product lavishes upon it millions of dollars' worth of free advertising and publicity? Especially when the chain buyers know this and order accordingly.

So what sort of career strategy is today's science fiction publishing executive, whose own career lives or dies on the bottom line, likely to press on the Hopens and Freireichs and Youngs?

Well, look at what seems to be in some danger of happening to even the likes of Neal Stephenson.

Stephenson was one of those aforementioned bolides of genius who burst upon the scene in full flower with a first science fiction novel, *Snowcrash*, which, in the manner of William Gibson's first novel *Neuromancer*, and without the benefit of overwhelming PR, established him as a major figure, and justly so.

His second SF novel, *The Diamond Age*, was published with pretty massive push behind it as such things go, and, cynic that the present nature of the industry has forced me to become, I must admit that I opened it with mixed expectations. *Snowcrash* led me to hope for another literary treat, but the level of the hype made me fear a cash-in sequel.

Huzzah, huzzah, nothing of the kind!

I am happy to be able to report that there is no connection whatever between *The Diamond Age* and *Snowcrash*. No common characters. No extension of plot lines. And the fictional universes are totally different.

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Whereas *Snowcrash* was set mostly in a future California, *The Diamond Age* is set mostly in a future coastal China and environs, which have been balkanized on the one hand and nanoteched on the other, and Stephenson's rendering of this series of interpenetrating cultures must have required daunting research as well as imaginative brilliance.

In addition, the rest of the world, and indeed much of East Asia too, has been post-nationalized, so that most people's primary loyalty is to their latter-day tribe, said tribes existing as scatterings of enclaves rather than within coherent contiguous borders.

One of the most dominant of these tribes is the Neo-Victorians, who have self-consciously recreated an eptified version of nineteenth century British colonial culture, a "Diamond Age" that is a kind of Disney version of the "Gilded Age."

In the tradition of the nineteenth century romance, the full title of the book is *The Diamond Age, or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer,* and the Young Lady's Illustrated Primer in question is a kind of sophisticated multi-media interactive virtual reality pedagogic device in the form of a storybook which falls into the hands of Nell, a waif from the slums, instead of the Girl of Good Family for whom it would appear to have been intended.

The Diamond Age is a long book, 455 pages, and while the cover copy alludes to its epic proportions, epic it is not, in a strictly literary sense.

What it is is *discursive.*

Not only does a large cast of characters following what appear at times to be only tangentially connected plot-lines wander about Stephenson's complex series of cultural landscapes, but the hardware and software device that is the Primer becomes a literary device that allows the author to take Nell on a novel-long vision quest of maturation through the virtual worlds within it.

Far be it from me to attempt to summarize this kind of story, for indeed *The Diamond Age* is the sort of novel whose interweaving linearities one scarcely remembers after having finished it, in the manner of Thomas Pynchon's *V* and *Gravity's Rainbow,* or Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost,* or Gunther Grass's *The Tin Drum* and *The Flounder,* to name several books in this mode I nevertheless retain fond memories of reading.

One forgives this sort of novel its meanderings, its digressions, its stories within stories within stories, its lack of apparent central linear focus, the leisurely pace with which it wends its way from first page to last.

Indeed, that is the charm of the successful discursive novel, the wandering journey itself in the company of the author-as-raconteur, and Stephenson succeeds admirably in this respect, turning *his* book into a kind of present-day cognate of Nell's Primer, making *The Diamond Age* not only discursive, but self-referential and formally playful.

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But. . . .

But even a discursive novel must eventually reach some kind of thematically and formally satisfying conclusion leaving readers with, if nothing else, the feeling that they have somehow completed the journey.

And long about page four hundred of *The Diamond Age* I began to get the uneasy feeling that maybe this wasn't going to happen, for with less than sixty pages left, it just didn't seem possible for Stephenson to bring all his fugal complexities together into a resolution that wouldn't seem breathlessly rushed in light of the previous pacing. And a little while later, as the structure started to open out into more new complexities rather than beginning to focus down toward some sort of climax, I realized that he didn't even seem to be trying. . . .

Oh no!

Oh yes.

I hope that I am wrong, but unless a writer of Neal Stephenson's demonstrated skill and even genius simply lost it at the end, and the editor of this intended SF bestseller simply didn't see it, after 455 pages, *The Diamond Age* concludes by revealing itself as a set-up for at least one sequel.

And what is wrong with that?

Well may you ask, especially if you are the editor in question. The publisher has made a major investment in this career-making book. It is only sound business practice to amortize it out over two books, or three, or hey, who knows, even as long a running series as *Dune* if we are lucky. The author has not only created a fictional universe of great interest and complexity, but has cunningly crafted it so that any number of additional virtual realities may be embedded within it. Would it not be profligate to waste all this rich material on one novel, on what in current parlance has come to be called a mere "singleton"?

Well, of course, in bottom-line terms, yes, it would. *The Diamond Age* was launched in a major manner that should have assured good distribution, a trade edition of a sequel timed to the publication of the mass market edition of *The Diamond Age* should consolidate and then expand Stephenson's rack space, and a third book in the series would probably insure that the three volumes backlist well enough to remain in print for quite a while.

In literary terms, on the other hand, this is a major mistake. Neal Stephenson's first two science fiction novels have proven that he is a novelist of limitless potential. *Snowcrash* proved that, unlike so many brilliant beginners, he knew how to *structure* a novel and bring his story to a satisfying closure. *The Diamond Age* has now proven that he is not a one-trick pony, that his need not be one of those careers that gets trapped in a consistent fictional "universe."

But *The Diamond Age* is a novel that ends nowhere in structural terms, and, on the evidence, apparently not out of a failure of craft so much as out of commercially delib-

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erate design. For a writer of Neal Stephenson's potential to knowingly develop such bad literary habits this early on in service to the diktats of market forces is a tragedy in the making.

Or, to frame the argument in terms of the esthetic of aircraft design, it is precisely the profligate waste of fuel and hence of money in the service of sheer exhilarating speed and power that makes jet fighters the seductively puissant state-of-the-art even to those who find their intended pragmatic function morally dubious.

And there you have the existential plight of both the knowing SF editor and the street-wise but idealistic science fiction writer under the current conditions of consolidated corporate publishing:

Literary values and commercially correct career strategy have become antithetical.

Not only have market forces come to warp structure away from satisfying closures, worse still, the central literary esthetic of science fiction, the evocation of the so-called "Sense of Wonder," the pleasurable shock of the new and the novel, the remaking of the world anew with every story, is antithetical to what publishers have learned from the episodic TV and sequential movies produced by the media combines that now own most of them.

Namely that *familiarity* sells, that there are more sales to be had with TV shows, movies, and books that leave the audience hungry for the next slice of the old familiar Twinkie than with product that reaches a satisfying closure, that that which is crafted to *sell* will, not surprisingly, sell better than that which is crafted simply to tell a good story.

There you have it.

As starkly and simply as that.

They pay their money.

And you make your choice.

Oh yes you do.

For there *are* alternatives to following the bottom-line imperatives of market forces, not easy ones maybe, but they *do* exist. Ponder, for example, the career choice made, consciously or not, by an apparent commercial naïf but literary sophisticate like Richard Kadrey.

Kadrey's recent *Kamikaze L'Amour,* like the Stephenson, is also a second novel, but it has been seven years since he published *Metrophage,* his first. Although an impressive first effort indeed, *Metrophage* did not win Kadrey fame or even modest fortune. Although his intricately and even lovingly detailed future Los Angeles therein certainly provided plenty of fictional space within which to do it, he did not write a sequel.

Kamikaze L'Amour, in terms of page count, is almost exactly half the size of *The Diamond Age,* and I think it would be safe to say that the novel was published with no more than half the hype, and the publisher would be pleased to sell half as many copies.

But what it loses in panoramic scope it gains in compression and drive, and what it loses in commer-

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cial appeal it gains in narrative energy and structural integrity.

In Kadrey's future, unfortunate experiment and/or climatic changes have caused the Amazon rain forest to march northward as far as San Francisco, along with its fauna and Indian tribes, and the milieu created thereby is a dense melange of pop cults, Ballardian post-catastrophic landscape, Conradian jungle darkness and Castanedian jungle psychedelia, successfully surfing the elusive interface between a kind of North American Magic Realism and science fiction.

Ryder, Kadrey's protagonist and first-person narrator, is a rock star who has faked his own suicide for complex metaphysical and psychic reasons it will take the reader and himself the whole novel to comprehend, for *Kamikaze L'Amour* is more or less the story of his vision quest through this lushly mutated landscape and the interior cognate within.

Kadrey is at least as inventive and even more attentive to detail herein than Stephenson is in *The Diamond Age,* and perhaps because his scope is narrower, his landscape, its flora and fauna, its ruins and semi-ruins, the remains of functioning technology within it, the characters, their inner lives, come to life with a more deeply realized luminous intensity.

And because it is so clearly structured as a vision quest that succeeds in reaching its fictional and spiritual apotheosis, it leaves the reader with a sense of closure, completeness, fulfillment of the literary contract.

This is not to batter *The Diamond Age* with the club of *Kamikaze L'Amour,* for these are two very different sorts of novels, and both have their virtues. And in their sometimes different and sometimes congruent manners, Stephenson and Kadrey are writers of more or less equal imaginative vision and narrative power.

But while one need not be Nostradamus to predict that *The Diamond Age* will sell more copies, *Kamikaze L'Amour* is the more completely realized in its own self-selected terms, and hence, in purely literary terms, the more successful novel.

Whether Kadrey actually made a conscious career choice between art and commerce I have no way of knowing. How he has survived the seven years between his first novel and *Kamikaze L'Amour* I have no way of knowing either, except that it couldn't have been off the royalties on *Metrophage,* and the indications from mutual acquaintances are that he is not the beneficiary of inherited riches.

I've met Kadrey upon occasion, and run across his work as an anthologist of avant garde fiction, practitioner and critic of a certain species of electronic music, illustrator, and sort of all-purpose cybernaut in venues only tangential to what is generally considered "science fiction."

Which is to say that Richard Kadrey seems to be a kind of mutated throwback-cum-flash forward to a cybernated update of the

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sort of bohemian polymath who worked the interface between avant garde artistic circles and the realm of science fiction between the late 1950s and the middle of the 1970s, the milieu that gave birth to the New Wave and cutting edge rock and roll, cyberpunk and video as an artform, and a transformation of comic books into the likes of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the French bande desinée.

For this sort of artist, whatever the art, the imperatives of the work come first and money is what you somehow have to manage to secure one way or another in order to keep doing it, perhaps as a matter of choice, or perhaps because you just can't help it.

A writer like Kadrey would seem to have no career strategy at all in the publishing street-wise sense, and whether he will ever make his mark as a truly major figure is in the hands of the gods of chance and not the press agents or the chain buyers. Nevertheless, it is creative talents like his that provide the intellectual and psychic base of the pyramid upon which much of the cultural innovation and true creative energy of the past quarter century have been built

A working class hero is something to be.

And, contrary to what may be the current commercial wisdom, a writer eschewing one's own tried-and-true in favor of literary adventure is maybe not such a bad thing to be either.

Case in point, Rebecca Ore.

Ore has thus far published six novels. The first one, *Becoming Alien,* was the story of a human abducted into a galactic civilization filled with all sorts of alien races, played not for laughs in the manner of *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and its inevitable sequels but more or less sincerely straight without getting heavy about it, in the manner of 1950s space adventure fiction at the top of its form or the "Known Space" cycle of Larry Niven.

This is the sort of stuff that has been at the center of the genre arguably as long as the genre has existed, Ore worked this vein as well as anyone had, and though *Becoming Alien* did not quite burst on the scene like a bombshell, it was well-received and deservedly so, and her second and third novels, *Being Alien* and *Human to Human,* were, guess what, sequels.

It seemed that Ore had set herself up as the proprietor of just the sort of fictional universe that might provide an endless series of novels, none of which might be a best-seller, but which collectively could carve out an ever-expanding slice of rack space that she might inhabit relatively lucratively and indefinitely.

Her fourth novel, however, *The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid,* was something totally different. Set entirely on a future Earth with a cast of characters more or less human, it was a literarily ambitious, entirely successful, and admirable foray into psychological realism, Dickian multiplexity of reality, depiction of both the historical Old

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West and the mythic version of the dime novels, and the relation of both to the American zeitgeist, among other things.

In short, a creative quantum leap in a direction far from that of her previous territory. Nor, apparently, was this a one-off buswoman's holiday from the alien-enriched universe that made her initial reputation, for now, in the space of a year or so, she has published two succeeding novels, *Slow Funeral* and *Gaia's Toys,* totally different from the trilogy, totally different from *Billy the Kid* and totally different from each other.

The less successful of these, and the closest to *Billy the Kid* (but not very), is *Gaia's Toys.* The setting is once more a future America, this one totally different, a world of genetic engineering gone sleazoid and environmental degradation, where war veterans on the dole rent out their brains as RAM, and quixotic little guerrilla groups abound. Most of the cast of characters are the sort of footloose victims-cum-losers who in our time tootle around the highways and cheap motels of the country's midsection trying to survive as best they can.

Eerily enough and obviously entirely coincidentally (although some of the characters in the novel itself might make a case for synchronicity), the Oklahoma City bombing and the sort of subculture revealed thereby seem to resonate in altered political but somehow psychically similar mode in *Gaia's Toys.*

These are the strengths of the novel. Ore has succeeded admirably in getting inside somewhat subnormal and/or damaged characters behaving as well as can be expected and perhaps a little more under extraordinary circumstances, making them sympathetic, and portraying empathetically and vividly a milieu other than where we are usually taken in science fiction, a future version of the sort of world one might experience on a drive from Little Rock to Minneapolis, or for that matter along the highway from any major airport into the central city.

Gaia's Toys is yet another departure for Rebecca Ore, or, more properly put, a further expansion of the scope of her literary territory. It is not without its flaws, chief among them a slackness of structure, a certain confusion as to what is really going on at times, a lack of real thematic resolution, but if it is only a partial success, it is an honorable one, an interesting and ambitious effort by a writer, who, having more or less arrived, refuses to remain content to stay there.

As witness the novel between *Billy the Kid* and *Gaia's Toys, Slow Funeral,* perhaps Ore's best work yet, and drastically different from the rest of her growing ouevre.

Slow Funeral is a kind of contemporary fantasy set in Bracken County, an Appalachian pocket universe where magic of a kind works after a fashion. Maude Fuller, daughter of Bracken County witches who has escaped to the modern antithesis thereof, Califor-

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nia, is summoned back by the family powers to do battle against the forces of evil. Or is she summoned back by the forces of evil to do battle against the family powers. . . ? Or. . . .

Whatever.

If this description makes *Slow Funeral* seem like something set in Manley Wade Wellman country, in the mystic backwoods mountains of country lore, well, superficially it is. But even when she is writing about magical goings on, Rebecca Ore remains a kind of gritty realist, and this territory is her home ground. And even when she is writing fantasy, she remains a science fiction writer, somehow, even to the point of offering up a potted geological explanation of the altered laws of reality prevailing in Bracken County. And the consciousness of Maude, her third person protagonist, while wise in the ways of the witchy woods up to a point, remains relentlessly modern and cynically contemporary.

The result is something weird and wonderful. *Slow Funeral* is at once an Appalachian folk tale and a realistic modern Southern gothic set in the same country, science fiction embedded in fantasy embedded in science fiction, much as Bracken County itself is embedded in realistically rendered contemporary America.

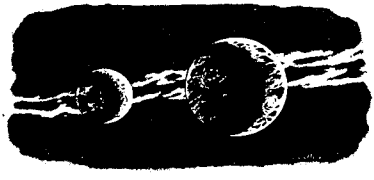
One hesitates to even point this out, but in other hands, *Slow Funeral* itself could become the first in an open-ended series of novels set in this magically realistic and realistically magic pocket universe.

I only even dare mention this because on the record Rebecca Ore seems to be the sort of writer unlikely to succumb to such temptation, perhaps not merely because her admirably diverse works seem to reveal a kind of hardscrabble survivalist idealism but thinly disguised by a certain veneer of cynicism, but because I suspect she may be incapable of so doing even if she wanted to.

In my own *Bug Jack Barron,* the title character at one point proclaims that the worst moment in life is not when you decide to sell out, but when you decide to sell out and find that no one's buying.

Contrariwise, perhaps, in the life of writers of a certain sort, what in retrospect may turn out to be the best moment of their lives may arise unbidden out of what appears to be the worst.

Namely, when they *are* buying, and you *do* decide to sell out, and you find that you just don't know how. ●



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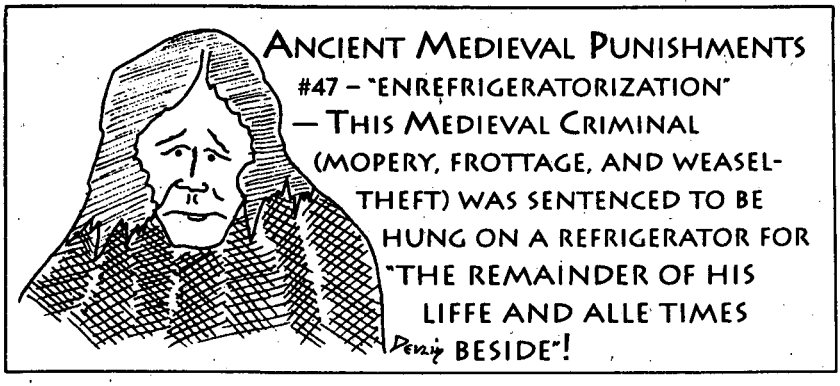
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TENTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

Hard to believe that our annual Readers' Award poll is in its tenth year already, since to us it seems like just yesterday that we started it . . . but, put it this way: if the Readers' Award was a kid, it'd be almost ready to start fourth grade by now, and would no doubt be nagging us to buy it new shoes for the occasion. (Scary how fast the time goes by, isn't it?) Well, at any rate, it's the January issue again, the start of another new year, and as our long-time readers know, that means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll.

Most of you know the drill. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from you, the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were your favorite stories from *Asimov's Science Fiction* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, cover artist, and interior artist you liked best in 1995. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *Asimov's* (pp. 168-172) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category. (In the case of the two art awards, please list the artists themselves in order of preference, rather than the individual covers or interior illustrations—with the poetry award, however, please remember that you are voting for an individual poem, rather than for the collective work of a particular poet that may have appeared in the magazine throughout the year.)

Some further cautions: Only material from 1995-dated issues of *Asimov's* is eligible (no other years, no other magazines, even our sister magazine *Analog*). Each reader gets one vote, and only one vote. If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the Index. No matter what category you think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than February 1, 1996, and should be addressed to: **Readers' Award, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Dell Magazines, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY, 10036.**

Remember, you—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. You are in charge here, and what you say goes. In the past, some categories have been hotly contended, with victory or defeat riding on only one or two votes, so every vote counts. Don't let it be your vote for your favorite stories that goes uncounted! Don't put it off—vote today!

The winners will be announced in an upcoming issue.

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BEST NOVELLA:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST NOVELETTE:

1. _____

2. _____

3 _____

BEST SHORT STORY:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST POEM:

1. _____

2 _____

3 _____

BEST COVER ARTIST:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

With the holiday lull, our annual look at next year. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

DECEMBER 1995

9-10—**Creation.** For info, write: **411 N. Central Ave., Glendale CA 91204.** Or phone: **(818) 409-0960** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Valley Forge PA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Convention Center. Guests will include: probably Star Trek or other media stars. A media-oriented commercial event.

29-31—**Event Horizon, Box 1438, Sterling VA 20164. (703) 404-2711.** Columbia MD Inn. H. Clement. Gaming & SF.

JANUARY 1996

5-7—**MusiCon, Box 198121, Nashville TN 37219. (615) 889-5951.** M. Bernstein, Tom Smith. SF/fantasy folk music.

5-7—**NecroCon, 6825 Flags Ctr. Dr., Columbus OH 43229. (614) 882-9812.** Harley Hotel. Kailen Mitchell. Low key.

5-7—**SunQuest, Box 677069, Orlando FL 32867.** Sheraton Plaza Florida Mall. SF/fantasy and other gaming.

12-14—**AGOG, Gamer's Haven, 2241 E. Broadway, Tucson AZ 85719. (520) 624-7423.** Convention Center. Games meet.

12-14—**Arisia, 1 Kendall Sq. #322, Cambridge MA 02139. (617) 371-6565.** Park Plaza, Boston MA. Bull, Shetterly.

12-14—**ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. (404) 578-8461.** Radisson Read House. W. J. Williams, Poole.

12-14—**TropiCon, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307. (305) 524-1274.** Doubletree. Hogan, Resnick, Hal Clement.

12-14—**RustyCon, Box 84291, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 248-2010.** Sheraton, Tacoma WA. Guests to be announced.

12-14—**ConFurence, Box 1958, Garden Grove CA 92642.** Atrium Marquee Hotel, Irvine CA. Anthropomorphics.

12-14—**Dreamation, Box 3594, GCS, New York NY 10163. (718) 881-4575.** Holiday Inn, Elizabeth NJ. Gaming meet.

19-21—**Legacy, c/o O'Gara, 10854 Hwy. 98 W., Pensacola FL 32506.** Theme: "SF & Horror: The Art and Writing."

19-21—**RQ Con, c/o 48 Barcelona, Box Hill VIC 3128, Australia. (03) 899-8539.** Bayswater School. Role-play games.

26-28—**Mutagen, GPO Box 910G, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. (03) 534-2752.** Eden on the Park. Telefantasy.

FEBRUARY 1996

2-4—**Potlatch, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228. (503) 232-1727.** Imperial Hotel. Small con for written-SF fans.

2-4—**CremeCon, Box 37986, Milwaukee WI 53237. (414) 223-3243.** Manchester East Hotel, Glendale WI. Watt-Evans.

2-4—**UK Nat'l. Filk Con, 212 Albert Rd., Leyton E10 6PD, UK. 44 (0) 191 539-9182.** Milton Keynes. SF folk music.

8-11—**CapriCon, Box 60085, Chicago IL 60660.** The sixteenth annual outing for this Chicagoland institution.

16-18—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311.** Sheraton. Lois McMaster Bujold, Gary Ruddell.

16-19—**Gallifrey One, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. (818) 752-9656.** Airtel Plaza, Van Nuys CA. For Dr. Who.

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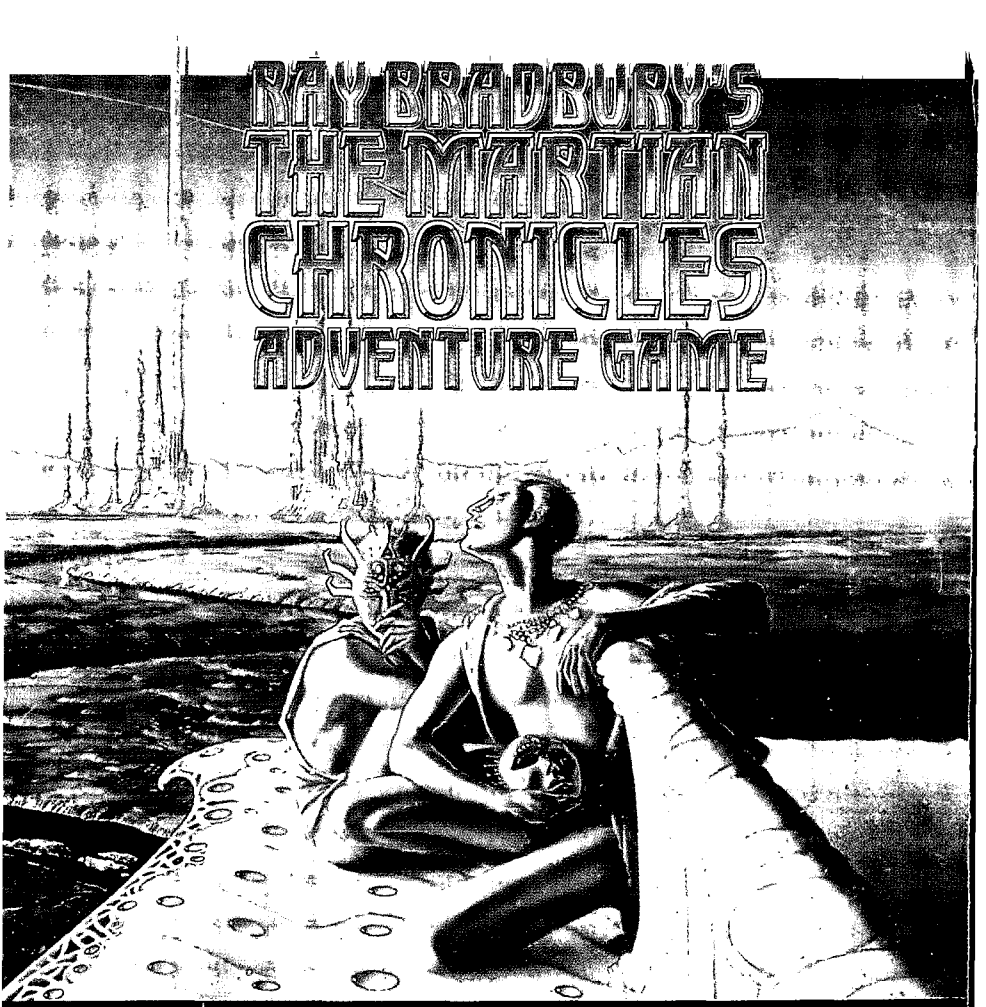

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